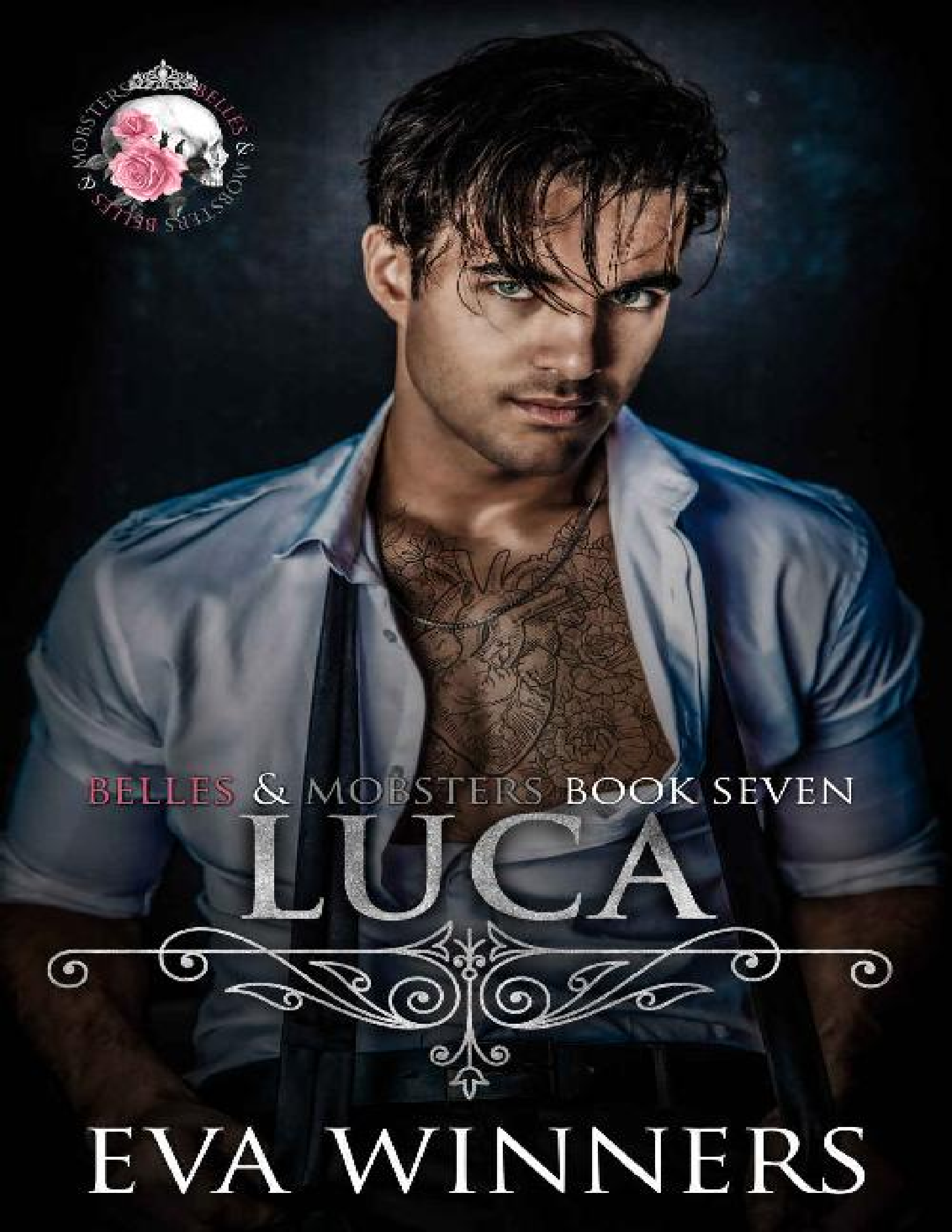
BELLES & MOBSTERS BOOK SEVEN
LUCA
EVA WINNERS

LUCA

Belles & Mobsters Series Collection

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Acknowledgments

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To my daughters, husband, family, friends and my readers.

Thank you!

I wouldn’t be able to do this without you.

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BELLES & MOBSTERS SERIES COLLECTION

We have come to an end of this series. It is bittersweet, but I keep reminding myself it is not the end.

While you're reading it, there are glimpses of other worlds and characters that will be coming your way in 2023.

I hope you love Luca and Margaret. They almost didn't get a book (how they taunted me!).
Keep in mind that the timeline goes parallel with earlier stories in the series so if you haven't read those books, there might be some spoilers.

Enjoy!

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PROLOGUE

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Luca

My eyes found her immediately.

There was a breathless moment when my heart stopped beating. It *confused* me. She was the only woman that had ever stirred this reaction. This *ache* in my heart.

Margaret Callahan was a force to be reckoned with. Those wild jet black curls that cascaded down her back like a thick curtain. The stubborn curls that framed her face, her ivory skin begging to be kissed.

Fuck, I had to get myself together around this woman.

She had to be my lesson in life.

My humility. My temptress. My torture.

She'd end up being the death of me. From the moment I first saw her, I hadn't been able to forget her. Then again, that night in Temptation. It'd been years since the first time I'd seen her, but that night in Cassio's club in New York City, I kicked off my own temptation and my own demise.

Ironically, she wore a costume that night too. A *Black Widow* costume that hugged her curves and made men drool. Cassio's event manager should have been killed when he thought of that idea - a Halloween party in August.

I was pretty sure that costume had done me in.

God, why her?

I wondered the same goddamned thing each time I laid eyes on her. Women threw themselves at my feet. Begged me to give relationships a try. Promised they wouldn't lay any demands on me because they knew it would be futile to try.

Not Margaret Callahan.

She just flat out rejected me before I even had time to formulate a fucking sentence. Not once but twice. Like a puppy chasing a bone, I came back for a third. Maybe she was my payback for never sleeping with a woman twice.

My eyes traveled over her petite figure. I wasn't the only one gawking. Quite a few men were studying her with hunger in their eyes.

She wore a wine-red elaborate gown with a sweetheart neckline that dipped low. Too low for my sanity. The satin bodice was black and clung to her waist in a corset style. But from the waist down, it flared in an elaborate design with multiple layers of tulle.

The mask she wore hid her face well. A custom-made lace mask. One side of her face was completely covered with the exception of her mouth. The other half of her face revealed her beautiful jaw. Nobody would have recognized her. But I wasn't just anyone. I'd recognize her anywhere. Her scent. Her smile. Her eyes.

She was too far away to see their color, but I knew they were the deepest crystal blue of the Caribbean Sea. The kind that could break your heart by just watching her.

Whispers filled the air. Men descended on her like vultures. She barely spared them a glance. Margaret was a flirt, but she liked a certain type. I was nothing like that type. She seemed to go for corporate type men. Clean cut.

But that wouldn't deter me from winning her over.

She was the one woman that would cause me to break my rule about sleeping with the same woman twice.

Drifting through the ballroom, her eyes kept darting left and right. Up and down. The chandelier had her choker necklace glimmering and catching everyone's eyes. She roamed the room slowly; the waiter passing with a tray paused to offer her a flute of champagne.

She offered him an absentminded smile, took a drink, and continued. Until her eyes landed on me.

Her steps faltered and she stood still.

She couldn't have recognized me. I had a *Phantom of the Opera* gold and black mask and half of my face was completely covered, leaving my lips and the left side of my face and jaw open.

A half-smile pulled on my lips. It was as if we coordinated.

She resumed walking, slowly, but in my direction. I didn't move. As my eyes locked on her, I waited.

If there was one thing I learned about Margaret Callahan, it was that she loved the chase. So maybe I'd let her chase me for a change.

It would be beneficial if my dick cooperated.

Like some kind of fucking teenage boy, my heart thundered inside my chest, harder with each step she took my way. Until she came to stand in front of me.

"Hello." Fuck, her voice was made for phone sex, sultry, suggestive, with a hint of amusement.

Jesus, if I could find one fucking thing, only one, that I disliked, maybe I'd get over this fascination with her.

"Want to have sex?"

Years! Years of chasing her and obsessing over the raven haired beauty, but all it took was a masquerade ball to have her in my bed.

"Moving fast…" I paused, cutting myself short. "Aren't we?" The last two times I saw her, I gave her a nickname. *Bella.* She was so fucking beautiful, it was impossible not to notice it.

Her eyes flashed with mischief, and it had been that spark that had captured my attention the first time we ran into each other. This woman would have been an Irish rebel if given the opportunity.

"We could talk for a while, if you want," she said nonchalantly. "You know, if you need a warm up. But I don't want to waste my time if you aren't interested in sex."

Jesus fucking Christ!

Was she adamant about getting in trouble? Cassio wanted to set her up so he could marry her cousin, but the girl had her own plans.

I took her hand into mine and dragged her out of the ballroom and up the stairs until we were at the top floor. I booked the penthouse suite of this hotel for the trap. Except it wasn't supposed to be with me. My brother, Cassio, wanted me to find her old boyfriend. Yeah, fuck that. I never had any intentions of finding anyone to seduce her.

I had a plan of my own. My brother was crazy if he thought I'd let anyone have this woman.

Once the door slammed behind us, I locked it and kept my stare firmly fixed on her. I didn't know what to expect from her tonight. Okay, maybe I

had an idea, but it fucking pissed me off that she had a plan of her own. To fuck another man. Just anyone.

“Get undressed,” I ordered, my voice raspy.

“What–”

I took her chin between my fingers and had her look at me. Fuck, those blue eyes. They were my vice.

“You want to be fucked,” I rasped. “So let’s do it.”

Her eyes widened behind the mask. “Seriously?”

“Get undressed, temptress.”

Her hand came to rest over her chest, her breath hitching.

Her fingers trembled as she reached for the lace of her bodice. Her movements were slow, her eyes on me. Once the laces came undone, she lowered the top and her gorgeous breasts spilled out.

She wasn’t wearing a bra. Goddamn it!

Her chest heaved with shuddering breaths, tempting me further. She dropped her dress and it pooled at her feet, leaving her standing in cherry red pumps and silk panties.

My dick twitched, hardening at the sight of her. Jesus Christ. She was like a Madonna in one of those paintings my grandfather liked to collect.

“Your turn,” she breathed. I arched an eyebrow at her request. It was another thing I loved about this woman. She was so fucking demanding. Maddening. My mind blanked. It fucking blanked at the sight of her naked body. She was gorgeous. From her graceful neck, to her generous tits, her soft hips down to her toned legs.

I shed the suit jacket, then unbuttoned my black dress shirt, and all the while my eyes were zeroed in on her. Her skin was flushed. That pale Irish skin marred with a blush everywhere I could see.

Her gaze was zeroed in on me as I discarded my shirt next. My shoes and socks followed, then my pants. She shimmied out of her panties, watching me.

“The masks stay on,” she murmured as I discarded my boxers.

“Your heels stay on,” I demanded, my voice hoarse.

When she didn’t answer, I sought out her eyes and found them zeroed in on my cock.

“W-what’s that?” she asked, her tongue sweeping over her bottom lip.

I wrapped my hand around my shaft and stroked it once. Her mouth parted, her eyes half-lidded and her blush deepening.

“This?” I asked, sweeping my thumb over the Prince Albert piercing. “It’s a piercing.”

She breathed heavily and I half expected her to either run or pass out.

“You’re huge,” she whispered. “Why do you have a piercing too?”

Her hand reached out and instantly my hard cock twitched, eager for her touch. But then as if she remembered she shouldn’t, her hand fell down her body. It didn’t escape me how she rubbed her thighs together, the glistening juices smearing on her inner thighs.

“It feels good against your clit, and when I’m inside you, against your G-spot.” I rubbed my cock, the piercing moving.

“Oh my God,” she gulped. “Are you serious?”

I nodded, pre-cum already glistening at the tip of my cock. If she decided this wasn’t for her, I’d fucking die. My cock pulsed and I fisted myself, squeezing my erection from the tip to the base.

“You ready to test it?” I challenged.

She bit her lip, not moving. I waited. It had to be consensual. She had to want it as much as I did.

“Yeah,” she finally answered.

Thank fuck.

I took her hand and took her to bed. The moment the back of her knees hit the mattress, she wrapped her hands around my neck and kissed me. Our mouths connected and a shudder rolled down my spine.

Fuck!

She tasted good. Like strawberries. My tongue slid between her lips and I owned her mouth, kissing her hard. Her one hand trailed down my chest, then lowered until her dainty fingers wrapped around my hard cock.

Both of us fell back, the mattress bouncing our bodies and dipping under our weight.

My body atop of hers, I rubbed my shaft against her wet folds and her back arched.

“Jesus, I can feel the cold metal,” she panted. I readied to slam inside her, when her words stopped me. “Condom,” she breathed. “Don’t forget the condom.”

Fuck, I’d prefer no condom with her, but I had one. Just in case. I reached for the wrap, used my teeth to rip it open, then handed it to her. Her small hand rolled it over my length and a shudder traveled down my spine.

She poised it at her entrance, and my eyes just about rolled into the back of my head.

“Okay, I’m ready,” she whimpered, her hands clutching my shoulders.

I pushed inside her in one forceful thrust and wedged myself deep in her. She let out a choked cry and her body spasmed.

“Holy fuck,” I hissed. She was as tight as a fist and her core pulsated around my length. She took all of me, stretching tight around my erection. This was heaven. This was hell.

I knew I’d need it for the rest of my life.

I pulled out, almost completely, leaving only the tip inside her before slamming back into her tight pussy. Her body trembled, goosebumps peppered her skin and she whimpered.

“*Oh. My. God.*” Her moans were fucking music.

I rucked my hips, my cock sliding in and out of her cunt, her juices smearing all over it. Her eyes lowered, watching my shaft disappear into her pussy, and I thought she loved the sight. Hovering above her, my pubic bone ground against her clit.

The noises she made had me almost blowing my load right there and then.

“Your pussy is taking me so well,” I praised.

Her eyelids fluttered shut. “Yes,” she moaned. Her fingers clawed at my back as I pumped into her again and again. Each thrust harder and deeper than the one before. The wet sounds of our bodies, flesh against flesh, our moans and grunts filled the room and bounced off the walls.

“God. Please,” she screamed.

I fucked her. Fast. Hard. Pounding furiously into her.

Her legs, heels still on, wrapped around my waist, her fingers at my back, my body against hers as I thrust into her. Her pussy clenched around me. Her moans and words urged me on. Her wetness, hot and sticky, dripped all over our bodies.

With a grunt, I drove into her hard. Mercilessly. The tip of my cock and the piercing brushing against her womb. She shuddered and quivered. A rush of wetness and her insides clenched around my cock. She whimpered again, moans spilling from her lips, as she reached her orgasm.

I came the hardest I ever had, my seed pouring into her. My heart pounded in my ears. I shuddered as my orgasm rattled through me. And I swore I saw lightning behind my eyelids.

“Mia Bella,” I whispered, hoping she wouldn’t hear the endearment,

I pulled out and she gasped, almost painfully.

The haze of pleasure slowly dissipated and my eyes lowered to where our bodies were joined mere seconds ago.

The sight of my seed and broken condom… blood smeared all over it, my cock and her inner thighs.

Margaret Callahan was a virgin? What the fuck!

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Chapter One

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Two Years Ago

We had just intercepted and rescued a shipment of women that my father had helped smuggle into the country. He, along with Raphael Santos' father, was deep into this human trafficking shit. When seeing shit like that, the only coping mechanism was humor. At least for me, it was.

It was a better alternative to moping, like I had time for that touchy feely crap, or being a grouchy ass. My brother was too serious. Luciano had been too angry since his wife disappeared. Nico had been avenging his sister and blaming himself for failing her. Alexei had been dealing with the consequences of a fucked up life. He probably had it the worst of any of us and that was saying a lot.

And me, I had been trying to atone for my first sin. Of course, I'd committed many more since then, but that first one still ate at me. It still kept me up at night. The raven haired girl with ocean blue eyes had haunted my dreams since then.

My eyes traveled over the young women huddled together, terror and fear in their eyes. It churned my stomach, but it didn't rattle me like the terror I had seen in that little girl's eyes all those years ago.

Maybe it was the fact that it was my first kill, but I was pretty sure it was because I was the one who had caused that look.

Shaking off those thoughts and shoving the past back into a dark corner where it belonged, I focused on the women here in front of me. We could save them. We could give them a better and safer life. The question was where.

The women didn’t want to go back to their homes. They wanted to hide here in the States. So, we pondered options, until Nico came up with one.

“Maybe we can double them in rooms for a week or so until we can expand the building,” Nico muttered pensively as he began typing vigorously on his phone. Nico’s housekeeper, Gia, was a victim of trafficking. He saved her and with Nico’s help, she was running a shelter for other women who’d been through the same thing.

“I know you’re good,” I scoffed at him. Nico had legitimate construction companies but setting up a brand new building in a week was a stretch. Even for him. “But expansion in a week? You’re not that good.”

Nico cocked his eyebrow, a smug look in his face.

“Challenge accepted,” he deadpanned. “What are we betting?”

“Aren’t you fucking rich enough?” I snorted.

“I’m not talking about money,” he drawled.

“Then what do you want?” I questioned him.

“A favor,” Nico responded without thinking about it. “Any favor, at any point in my life when I want it.”

“Don’t do it,” Luciano warned, sharing an amused glance with Cassio. These old fuckers thought they knew me so goddamn well. “You’re gonna lose.”

“He lost already,” Alexei chimed in. Lovely, not even the cold psychopath believed in me.

“Deal,” I said.

Nico grinned like a shark as we shook hands. I’d make him lose this bet.

A cell phone beeped and all of us glanced at our phones. It was Nico’s; he’d gotten a reply.

“Okay, Gia will take them,” Nico announced. “I’ll have my construction team work on building expansion, but until then, Gia said she can accommodate them.”

“Excellent,” I grumbled. Geez, even his housekeeper was too efficient. “Now, let’s go and celebrate. Shall we hit your club in the city, Cassio?”

“Temptation?” Nico questioned. “Isn’t there a Halloween party or something?”

“In fucking August?” Luciano grumbled. It was my sentiment exactly. I hated costume parties. It was a goddamned circus.

Cassio just shrugged his shoulders. “The event manager is doing some shit cramming all of the year’s events into this month. Next week it’s a

Christmas party."

Luciano and Nico promptly called the event manager a moron, rolling their eyes. I couldn't agree more, but it was Cassio's club. I wasn't much into owning clubs. I preferred oil refineries, technology companies, and shit like that.

"No Temptation for me," Alexei's cold tone interrupted Luciano's creative names for Cassio's event manager as if he was going down the alphabet.

"Yeah, Temptation is too soft for me too," I replied. "But when Cassio refuses to open something more hard core, you just have to settle for Temptation."

Alexei flipped me off with a blank expression on his face.

"Go open your own hard core sex club," Cassio grumbled. "You kinky bastard."

I grinned. I wasn't into kinky stuff, not that I wouldn't give it a try once. But I could take it or leave it.

"I might," I said. "And call it Cassio."

"And I just might beat your ass," Cassio mused.

As if he could ever. My older brother was delusional sometimes.

Leaving them behind, I jumped into my Bugatti and drove myself to Temptation, unaware that there'd be exactly that, a temptation, waiting for me there.

I STRODE INTO THE CLUB, waving a hand to Alan, Cassio's bouncer.

"Hey, Alan," I greeted him. "Busy tonight."

"Every night this month," he grumbled. See, even his own bouncer hated the idea of holidays in August.

A young woman came up beside me. "Thanks for waiting."

I cocked my eyebrow and gave her a side-glance. She smiled at me, her eyes shining like two blue sapphires with depths of ocean blues. The same blues as those of the girl who haunted my dreams.

"Keep walking," she murmured. Was she using me to get into the club? I almost laughed. Women usually gave me more than a double take and this one barely glanced my way, her eyes attentive and watching Alan.

My eyes traveled over her. The same shade of raven black hair. The same blue eyes. She was older, taller, with a killer body in a *Black Widow* costume that hugged her curves. It was her. I was certain of it.

Margaret Callahan.

I signaled to Alan with a nod to let her in. We barely stepped foot inside the club and she disappeared without so much as a thank you.

But we weren't done yet. Far from it if I had my way. I headed after her, scanning the dark hallway way for the petite raven haired beauty dressed in a tight *Black Widow* suit.

Fuck, I'd lost her in the crowds already.

I headed for the dance floor, my eyes traveling over the crowd of bodies dressed up in costumes. Most were dancing, or trying to anyhow, as music blasted through the speakers and the floor vibrated with the bass.

It was only then that I spotted her. She was dancing with a redheaded girl dressed as Wonder Woman, the two of them laughing and grinding against each other.

Ignoring Wonder Woman because Black Widow was always my thing, I watched them and waited for a break. Women usually never danced together for too long. The moment they'd get some space between them, I intended to pounce.

As I stared at the woman moving sensually on the dance floor, my memories took me back to the first time I saw her.

Moaning and groaning came from the bedroom, my father's grunts louder and louder.

I hated this shit. Who expects a twelve-year-old kid to stand guard while his father fucks someone?

Cassio was in his first year of college, leaving me to deal with our father alone. I hated him, but I knew if I fucked this up, he'd beat me black and blue.

So, I stood and waited, ignoring the squeaking sounds of the bed and the voices that came from the bedroom. My eyes roamed the large hallway, the door of one of the rooms left wide open. I slowly walked over, keeping my footsteps silent like I had been trained, and peeked inside.

It was a girl's room. Lots and lots of pink.

There were bears, dolls, ballerinas and more bears.

Whatever girl occupied this room had a serious obsession with bears.

Before I had a chance to set foot into the room, I heard a soft commotion downstairs. Whispers. Pink and bears forgotten, I pulled out my gun from the back of my pants.

My hand shook a bit, but I instantly steeled myself. I couldn't show weakness. Father would not approve, and if he saw it, he'd make me regret it.

Gripping the cold metal, I took a step towards the stairs. Then another. Until I was almost at the top of it, looking down.

It was then that I saw them. A man and a little girl.

He climbed the stairs, his own gun in his hand and the little girl with hair the color of darkest night stared after him. Her eyes flickered over him and our gazes connected.

My chest heaved. A wave hit me. It was almost… peaceful. Like laying under the sun in Nonno's yard. Or swimming in Sicily.

"What are you doing here, boy?"

Paradise forgotten, I met the man's gaze and my heart sped up. It had to be the girl's father. He had the same blue eyes, but they weren't as beautiful as hers.

"Motherfucker," the man hissed while my heart beat hard against my chest. It was painful. "You're Benito's son."

I blinked. The murderous expression on his face hit me wrong. Father said everyone wanted us dead. Cassio said to think before reacting.

It was too late. Bang. Bang. Bang.

Instantly, red stained his chest. He tumbled down the stairs and it felt like my whole world turned over as if I was falling right alongside him.

Loud laughter shattered the memory and brought the world back into focus.

I blinked my eyes, then inhaled deeply. Margaret Callahan danced, those same blue eyes that had haunted me for years flickering my way briefly before darting away.

The break came in from an unlikely source. My brother. Cassio, who rarely came down to the dance floor, schmoozed his way with the red-haired Wonder Woman. I was so fucking flabbergasted to see him dance that I missed my goddamn chance. Some fucker had swooped in on Margaret and was dancing like a striptease was a vanilla thing. Like he was some kind of fucking Chippendale.

Red mist marred my vision.

The guy moved fast. His lips were on my Black Widow, his hands roaming her ass, touching her everywhere. His mouth moved against her earlobe and by the pretty little blush of color to her cheeks, he wasn't telling her a bedtime story. At least not the kind your mama would read to you.

It was then that I decided I'd kill the guy.

I've committed many sins and cold-blooded murders in my life. All men but one, my first kill, deserved it. Today was the first time that I'd kill someone because of jealousy.

Fuck, my repertoire was growing.

I gritted my teeth so hard, my jaw hurt, as I watched them together. It took all my control, which was not so great most times, not to storm between them and smash his face in the process.

The moment I spotted his fucking hand attempt to get into her pants, I lost my shit. I signaled the bouncer. He knew what that meant. Take him into the basement.

Margaret watched wide-eyed as they dragged him off, shrugged her shoulders, and continued dancing. My lips curved up into a smile.

I had a feeling there wasn't much that shocked my woman.

I froze.

My woman? No, it couldn't be. I just freaking met her.

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Chapter Two

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MARGARET

Dancing and moving my body sensually, aware of men's eyes on me, I made sure to give them a show. It was easier to control my body and men's reaction to it than to try for something deeper. Men always thought they knew what they'd get with me, but they didn't. Heck, I didn't even know myself.

Something always held me back. Something from my past that I just couldn't fully grasp. It seemed my entire existence revolved around a foggy dream that kept coming back. The only clear image in that entire dream was my father's dead eyes and a pool of blood. All around him, swallowing him whole. I know I was there when he was murdered, but I could never get all the details. Not sure I wanted them, to be honest.

But there was something different tonight. The hair on the back of my neck rose, and I could feel a slight tremor rolling through my body. It wasn't exactly unpleasant, but I didn't like it either.

"It's because Áine is dancing with a man," I kept telling myself.

Yet, the reasoning didn't make sense. I wasn't exactly a subtle, shy woman. Yes, I had my own set of issues but having men's eyes on me was never one of them.

Blue, yellow, purple, red. The lights flashed, casting a rainbow of color over my black, rubbery Black Widow outfit. Some obscene song blared through the speakers, as the bodies on the dance floor moved together, hips rolling, lips touching.

A set of hands landed on my hips, and I played along. The stranger whispered things he wanted to do to my pussy. I felt nothing. Zip. Nada.

And his mouth was way too close to my ear, breathing into it like a goddamn hurricane was happening in my brain.

I might act like a seductress and flirt, but it didn't mean I hooked up.

A bouncer showed up and dragged the fellow away. I looked after him, but then just shrugged my shoulders and continued dancing.

A drop of sweat rolled down my back. The roll of my hips, the glide of my hands through my hair. I moved slower as my eyes subtly swept over the dance floor, my body never pausing the movements.

Dark eyes. Darker expression.

My movements faltered and our gazes clashed. The man stood in the back of the dance floor. A woman next to him, her eyes gushing over him and her lips moving.

But all his attention was on me.

Even under the dim lights of the nightclub, I could see he was tall. There was something familiar prickling my mind, but I couldn't quite grasp it.

Leaving the woman behind, without sparing her another glance, he stalked towards me with long, purposeful strides.

I stood there, like prey preparing to be caught, staring at him, and drawing in his gaze.

Willingly.

My nipples tightened. The blood in my veins ignited with desire. A throbbing ache pulsed between my thighs.

He was even taller than I first thought. I craned my neck, holding his gaze as he came to a stop in front of me.

We stared at each other, a thick, suffocating tension filling the air. His wide shoulders blocked the rest of the club from my view, leaving me seemingly alone with him. His presence skimmed down my body and unease rose up to choke me.

A memory pushed through my temples, fighting to get through.

Except, I couldn't think with him in my space.

I took a step back. He took a step forward.

"You've grown up," he said softly. "Bella."

I blinked, then blinked again. He made it sound as if he knew me.

I inhaled slowly. Released it. Then repeated.

"I don't know you," I gulped.

He didn’t move. No emotion crossed his face, but something dark moved through his eyes that weren’t as dark as I initially thought. There were hints of hazel in them. Or the club lights were playing tricks on me.

I swallowed and tried to keep my voice steady with my next words. “Can you please back the fuck off?”

His lips lifted. He didn’t move, not even an inch.

“Scared, mia bella?” His finger came to my neck, gently sweeping over my thundering pulse. I held my breath as he massaged the vein, as if he was telling me he could end my life by slicing it.

A memory slammed through me, causing my knees to weaken. It felt like standing at the edge of the ocean, fighting hurricane waves. I’d have fallen to my knees, if he wasn’t quick to grab me around my waist.

“Benito King,” I rasped, internally shaking. But I refused to show it.

Real, volatile anger poured off him at those two little words, and it was freaking terrifying. There were demons in his eyes, and if I didn’t get the fuck out of here, one of them would consume me.

“That’s my father, not me,” he corrected me.

Of course, I knew that. He was too young to be him.

“Get outside, Margaret,” Da ordered in a hushed tone. “And hide.”

My heart beat fast, hurting my chest. He said something else too, but I couldn’t quite grasp it. I watched Da at the top of the stairs. One second he stood still, the next he tumbled down the stairs, blood smears trailing down to the bottom where he landed.

Mother’s voice echoed, but I couldn’t see her. There was one name that rang through the house. Benito.

I blinked, then blinked again. The memory felt disjointed.

An evil man stood over Da’s body. Dark eyes. Cruel smile.

I didn’t know Benito. Not then.

More words spoken. I just stared, blinking hard and my vision blurry. I didn’t want to lose Da. I had to watch him for as long as I could. But he wanted me to run. I turned to bolt too late.

“Where are you running to, little girl?” he purred, lifting me up into the air. My fingers clawed at his wrist. I gasped for air as he carried me, my feet dangling off the ground.

A cold blade pressed against my throat.

“Mamma,” I choked out, every syllable hurting my throat. She didn’t move.

My body jerked.

I swallowed, keeping my racing heart at bay. The memories were fuzzy and confusing, but there. I knew it was a memory. But how could I have forgotten it?

“Cassio King?” I choked out, fighting my way back from the memory.

He shook his head. “Luca.”

The name sent a tremor through me. The force of his presence skimmed down my spine. His cologne invaded my lungs. Everything about him caused something dark and tingling to seep through my pores.

“I’d say ‘Nice to meet you’ but my Da taught me never to lie.” Agitated at myself and hating any offspring of Benito King, I tapped my foot in agitation. “Now move out of my way, or you’ll regret the day you were born.”

He gave me a dry chuckle, his lips curved in a sardonic smile. “Too late for that, mia bella.”

“Stop calling me that,” I snapped. “You… you…” I couldn’t find the appropriate word to describe him.

“Dance with me,” he demanded, his hand still around my waist, pulling me closer to him.

Before I realized what I was doing, my body moved at his command. Slowly. Sensually. Sexy.

I felt his hard body against mine and every nerve in me shuddered and tingled in expectation. I didn’t like it. No, that was an understatement. I hated it.

He bent his head, his mouth against my ear. “I’m going to have you, mia bella. I didn’t know it until now, but you’re my end game.”

His hot breath sent shudders down my back. His words sent unsettling tremors through every nerve in my body.

I pushed him and stumbled backwards, then quickly pulled myself together.

Through the rush buzzing through my veins and ringing in my ears, the words of the song blaring through the speakers finally registered.

‘You’re just a fuckboy’ blared through the speakers. Everyone knew that Luca King was a notorious playboy. He was a master of one night stands. In fact, it was rumored it was his rule. Never sleep with the same woman twice.

“I know your reputation, Luca King,” I hissed, glaring at him with hate. “You’re a fuckboy no decent woman would ever want.”

Then I turned on my heels, flipped him the bird over my shoulder, and never looked back.

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Chapter Three

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LUCA

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Two years later

Las Vegas was welcoming, as always.

Two years had passed since I first crossed paths with Margaret at Temptation.

Since then, we'd run into each other occasionally. Never accidentally. Most of the time, she acted like she didn't even know me. I couldn't stay away. I needed to see those crystal blue eyes and drown in them.

I'd kept tabs on her all along.

I convinced myself it was just to ensure she was safe and well. It was fucking bullshit. It was to feed my obsession. The girl couldn't stand me. Each time she spotted me, her lips would curl into a sneer and she'd glare at me. Looking like my father wasn't doing me any favors.

A few times she even called me a stalker. I took it as a compliment.

So more often than not, I watched her from the shadows. I couldn't have her turn to her uncle and brothers for help.

Cassio would have my balls if I ruined his chances at his match. Of course, the match he wanted wasn't exactly the match that he currently had.

Cassio got it into his head that he needed to get married. The plan was set in motion, but the burning part was that he planned on using my woman, his current fiancée, so that he could get the woman he really wanted. My goddamned woman. So while Cassio schemed how to use Margaret as a decoy to get Áine Evans for his bride, I made my own plans.

But he was crazy if he thought I'd sit back and watch as he set up Margaret with some douchebag.

If Cassio's plan went through, we'd become family since Áine was Margaret's cousin. And I'd be damned if I watched my woman with another

man for every holiday, birthday, and reunion.

Yeah, fuck that!

Cassio lined up Margaret's old boyfriend to show up in Vegas. Then he left all the logistics to me. I ensured the fucker was buried six feet under.

Since my brother was vague with specifics, I left it all to my imagination.

I'd take the role of her seducer.

Margaret and Áine were headed to Las Vegas for Margaret's bachelorette party. Typical of her, she had already started arranging wild parties. Even a visit to the Chippendales' show. God, if my plan worked, I'd have to keep a tight rein on her. There'd be no other men for that woman but me, so she better get used to it.

It wasn't difficult to send an exclusive, personal invitation to her email box as a welcome from the Las Vegas elite. I only had to get help from a bloodthirsty Emory DiLustro and pay a hefty fee worth a few million, but Margaret would be worth every penny.

So the invitation went out to this exclusive event and Margaret took the bait.

Now, I just had to get her into bed. With me.

"Ready, brother?" Cassio asked.

He had no fucking idea how ready I was. I'd been patient for far too long and patience was never my virtue. Cassio was the patient one of the two of us. He hid all his emotions and acted like the world was ending every goddamn day. It had to be his fucking old age. There were almost six years difference between the two of us. I was thirty four and Cassio was… well, an old man.

It had to be the reason why I was more laid back, which made this whole plan such a fucking pain. But I had to be smart about it and play my cards right.

Because I played to win.

"Let's rock-n-roll," I told him.

Three men stood in all-black suits, guns tucked in, wearing earpieces. I preferred less entourage, but Cassio liked to be safe rather than sorry.

We left the penthouse suite and headed for the nightclub only a few floors down. Once in the club, we headed for the private VIP suite. The lights of Las Vegas, Sin City, flickered through the glass windows, but I was immune to it all.

The only thing that could draw my attention was the woman I wanted.

A waitress waited for us in the VIP suite, eyeing us. “Can I pour you a glass?”

She practically purred the words. Ignoring her, I watched the dance floor like a hawk.

“Scotch,” my brother answered.

I spotted Margaret at the same time, strutting into the club like she owned the place. Her dress was too short; its sheer material not leaving much to the imagination. The sparkly little thing moved with her body, drawing all eyes to her.

She flipped her hair back, knowing full well most men in the club drooled watching her.

The corners of my lips tipped up. Fuck, I loved her confidence. Even her sass. Her long jet-black hair swung as she moved, her hips swaying with the beat.

Fuck, and that ass. I’d like nothing better than to bite it and leave a mark on it.

Aware of the waitress’ eyes on me, I realized she was waiting for my order.

“Bourbon,” I uttered.

Áine leaned over and whispered something in Margaret’s ear, then the two shared a smile. Those two were close. It was surprising, since their personalities were nothing alike. Another few words exchanged and the two joined their friends on the dance floor. Every man’s eyes were on them as they danced, laughed, and drank.

It wouldn’t be long and she’d be mine.

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Chapter Four

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MARGARET

I studied the invitation. A masquerade ball.

Áine was off somewhere and this invitation was only for one. It had to be a sign to just go ahead and do it. It had always been on my bucket list, and I had yet to go to one.

Besides, this whole arranged marriage to Cassio King rubbed me the wrong way. I had yet to meet my future husband. Although his brother certainly was everywhere.

I just about had a heart attack earlier when I spotted Luca at the elevators. I didn't notice him at first. The man with tattoos marking his neck was the first one I spotted. Not my type, but hot for sure. And then there was Luca King.

Motherfucker was in Vegas.

Maybe he was checking up on me on his big brother's orders?

I snickered. Fuck them both.

If Cassio King wanted to meet me or see what I was doing, he should stop being a chicken and do it himself. Surprisingly, Luca behaved like he hadn't recognized me either.

Maybe he was scared that I'd shoot him again, I mused to myself. He certainly hadn't shared that little piece of information with his big brother; otherwise I'd be the last woman on this planet that Cassio King would make a marriage contract with.

It wasn't that the arranged marriage bothered me per se. It was who it was arranged to that I wasn't keen on. I should just kill them both and be done with it. Oh well. And then there was the whole virginity thing. Cassio

King, nor any fucking member of the King family, was worth me saving myself for.

Benito King caused my father's death and his sons were guilty by default. Of course, so was my mother but I couldn't bear to see my brothers hurt. Especially the twins. It would destroy them.

So I kept my mouth shut.

But I refused to give anything more than what I was forced to give to any King member. So, I had to get laid and get that troublesome V-card taken care of. Didn't matter who did it. Anyone would be better than Cassio King.

My eyes studied my reflection in the mirror. My gown with its wine-red skirt had a sweetheart neckline that dipped very low. I was leaving nothing to chance. I'd seduce someone tonight if it was the last thing I did on this Earth. The satin bodice was black and clung to my waist in a corset style. Truthfully, I had no fucking clue how women breathed in this shit.

No matter though. I looked fabulous. Especially from the waist down. The dress flared in an elaborate design with multiple layers of tulle. The mask I wore would hide me well. It was a custom-made lace mask, covering only one side of my face and leaving my mouth completely open.

I'll need my lips tonight, I mused, thinking myself so clever.

With the last glance at my reflection, I left the hotel room. It worked out well that Áine was nowhere to be found. I'd taken the elevator, snickering at how hard it would be to take the stairs in this beautiful gown. My cousin would have surely made me take the stairs. She had some freaking elevator phobia.

Once out of the hotel, I strutted to the driver.

"Masquerade?" I questioned and he nodded silently.

How freaking convenient was it that the party also supplied a driver?

It took less than ten minutes to arrive at the destination. To my surprise, it looked almost like a residence rather than a club. A luxury residence hotel maybe.

Taking a deep breath, I attempted to calm my fluttering heart. This was reckless. Dangerous. Probably stupid.

And yep, I was still doing it.

The driver opened the door and I thanked him, gathering up my skirts between my fingers and exiting the limo.

"Welcome." A woman dressed as a playboy bunny greeted me.

My eyes traveled over her outfit. Jesus, I went with the renaissance theme. Maybe I should have gone for a slut theme? That would surely have gotten me laid. With all these layers of clothes, I might not have a chance next to women dressed as sexy as this woman.

Ugh, fuck!

I entered the large lit ballroom and my steps faltered. Whispers filled the air. Maybe it was just the buzzing in my brain. Or the shred of sanity warning me I was being stupid. I didn't know.

Men already rushed my way and a relieved sigh left me. Maybe I looked good enough to get laid. I winced at the crude thought, but quickly ignored it.

Drifting through the ballroom, I let my eyes wander over the men. If I slept with a stranger, it'd have to be someone I found attractive. And I would insist that masks stay on. It was safer if we kept our identities hidden from each other. I roamed the room slowly. A waiter passed me by with a tray and paused to offer me a flute of champagne.

I was parched. Offering him an absentminded smile, I took a drink and then downed it in one gulp, as my eyes continued looking for a victim. Liquid courage, as the saying goes.

Until I saw him. A *Phantom of the Opera* gold and black mask, covering half of his face staring at me.

My steps faltered and I stood still.

I was always a sucker for *The Phantom of the Opera*. A tragic love story. Check. A crazy, slightly stalkerish man. Check. A man crazy enough to burn down the whole theater. Check.

Okay, he'd be the one for me tonight.

I resumed walking, slowly, in his direction. He didn't move but he watched me. Something about the way he watched me had my body buzzing with a thrill. He stared at me through eyes too veiled to read, watching as I walked over to him and somehow I had a feeling I was in his domain.

I came to stand in front of him.

"Hello." Shit, I hope that was seductive enough. It wasn't. I had to up my game. "Want to have sex?" What the fuck? Did I really just ask that?

His eyes widened then grew dark and hazy. Seductive.

Wait, I reminded myself. *I am playing the seductress.*

“Moving fast…” He paused and I waited while heat bloomed in my stomach, moving lower and lower, in a wave that had me squeezing my thighs. Jesus, was this normal? “Aren’t we?”

Oh, I liked him. Playing hard to get and all. I never could resist the temptation of a chase.

My lips curved into a smile.

“We could talk for a while, if you want,” I said nonchalantly. “You know, if you need a warm up. But I don’t want to waste my time if you aren’t interested in sex.”

Directness seemed to work, because he took my hand in his and dragged me out of the ballroom like an eager man. Jesus, I was acting like a slut despite the fact that I hadn’t dressed for the part, but I was just as eager as he was. My eyes glanced down to where he held my hand, his hold firm and strong. And those hands… fuck, he had sexy hands.

Shit, maybe they slipped me a lady version of Viagra in that champagne because suddenly I was feeling really horny. Like I needed this guy inside me. Right-the-fuck-now.

We found ourselves in a luxury bedroom, the door slamming shut behind us. I could feel his gaze on my skin, leaving a trail of fire in its wake.

“Get undressed,” he ordered, my voice raspy.

“What–”

He took my chin between his fingers and had me look at him.

“You want to be fucked,” he rasped. “So let’s do it.”

God, my heart was thundering so wildly I thought I’d faint. “Seriously?” I breathed.

“Get undressed, temptress.”

Oh my gosh! This guy would make all my dreams come true.

IF I KNEW how great an orgasm felt, I’d have jumped on that bandwagon sooner. Albeit, something told me it was because of this guy.

My body still trembled with the aftermath of the most intense pleasure I had ever felt, when his next words just about sent me into a spiral.

“Do you want me to eat your cunt?” I couldn’t have nodded more eagerly if I wanted to. “Good, then spread your pretty legs so I can eat that gorgeous pussy.”

With a thrumming pulse and shaky thighs, I obeyed, watching him trail his mouth down my body. His thumb traced my landing strip and my stomach instantly tightened.

Jesus, my entire body was on fire. His eyes, full of consuming desire, ignited a lust in my blood and refused to let go.

He looked at me like I was the most gorgeous woman he had ever seen. Like I was everything he had ever dreamed about.

I gasped the moment his tongue swept between my legs, lapping my wetness.

“Oh, my–”

He groaned low in his throat, sending a vibration through me. Heat erupted, spreading down to my toes. He licked my pussy, from entrance to clit, like his life depended on it.

I had to fight the immediate pleasure that threatened to erupt through me. He ran a rough hand down my legs, pulling both of my thighs over his shoulders.

My fingers tangled in his thick hair, grabbing a fistful of it and holding on for dear life.

The moment he pushed his tongue inside me it was game over for me. My body shook as he thrust his tongue in and out. *In and out.*

My eyes rolled back in my head and my spine arched off the tousled sheets.

Like we had done this a million times, I started to move my hips in rhythm to his tongue, grinding against it. He sucked on my clit, then nipped it and suddenly, the pressure exploded.

I came so hard that my ears rang, drowning me in the most satiated way possible.

He murmured words, but I couldn’t hear a single one.

Was it possible to pass out from too much pleasure?

I WOKE up with the sweet ache pulling at my muscles and an arm slumped over me.

Last nights' X-rated images rushed to the forefront of my mind and suddenly, my pussy clenched, needing more of this stranger. Jesus, this had to be what it felt like to be thoroughly fucked.

It was better than anything I had ever imagined. Jesus Christ!

My hand reached for my face and I sighed in relief. My mask was still on. Thank God, although I was surprised considering how wild we'd gotten. After the first time, and once he'd gotten over the initial shock of finding out I was a virgin, he was relentless when it came to fucking me. He didn't comment on my V-card. He cleaned me up and then made it up to me even more. Not that he had to because my first time was freaking amazing.

And I'd never regret a single moment for as long as I lived. Not a minute of it. I might be about to marry someone else, but the memories of last night would be with me forever.

I risked a glance over my shoulder, almost hoping he wouldn't have his mask on. A tiny flash of disappointment washed over me, but I quickly scolded myself.

This was a no strings night of wild sex, nothing more.

Still, it didn't stop me from studying his body. Shit, he was hot. His body was every woman's fantasy. A masterpiece. My mouth watered watching his sculpted muscles and that chest marked with ink - a tattoo of a rose wrapped around a heart.

I better get my ass out of here before I went for another round with this sex god. For a former virgin, I'd certainly become a greedy wench.

Careful not to wake him up, I slid out of bed and reached down to grab my dress when a discarded condom caught my eye.

Fuck!

Even from here I could see it was shredded. Fucking shredded.

Oh my God!

Glancing at the bed, I murmured a prayer.

I could get away with a lot of things, but getting pregnant by a stranger wouldn't be one of them.

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Chapter Five

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LUCA

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Present

Cassio's engagement dinner was a fucking bore. I'd have more fun at a kids' birthday party than this crap. Áine and Cassio bickered, but I tuned it all out, only chiming in every so often. Sometimes to help, and sometimes to hinder because I could be an ass, even on a good day.

Unfortunately, I knew none of the men invited would bring any excitement to this evening. If he wasn't my brother, and I didn't love him, I'd skip it. But Cassio had done a lot for me over the years.

So I'd have to contend with boring Irish and non-Irish people. The highlight of the fucking evening was Chad Stewart and he didn't even get shot. The state's attorney prick. The fucker was Áine's ex-boyfriend and a friend to Marco, my asshole half-brother. She caught him cheating in Vegas, so of course, he was history. But that wasn't his worst crime. If I knew my brother, and I had to wager, Chad Stewart wouldn't live a long, happy life.

Honestly, I was surprised Cassio let him live.

My eyes roamed the room with disinterest while I searched for a certain woman with raven black hair. God, it just about killed me when she cried earlier. The only two women whose tears got to me were my mother's and Margaret's. I didn't remember much of my mother, but I remembered every single meeting with Margaret.

I still remembered her as that scared little girl. Her terror filled blue eyes on her father bleeding on the floor. Her sorrow was my own. Her fear was my own.

Every time I saw her, something in my chest twisted. Painful. Hopeful. Or maybe it was hopelessness. I had lost her long before I had a chance to have her. I'd been a coward. I pulled the trigger.

If she’d known–

My heart weighed heavily in my chest. The self-loathing burned, which surprised me. I didn’t know that I was capable of that feeling but there it was. This incessant pounding when I thought of her was concerning.

I shook my head.

Maybe it was time for a physical. It could be an early sign of a heart attack. I hadn’t exactly been watching my diet lately because all I could think about was eating Margaret’s pussy. Jesus, her cunt was the only thing on my mind since that night in Vegas back in March.

Almost two months of torture.

If I was honest with myself, it had been years of torture. A little girl stole my heart long before I realized what that was.

And here we were. She was so close, but so fucking far away. The same hate lurked in her eyes. Did she remember the night her father died? Why else would she hate me?

It was the only wrong I had perpetrated against her. Since then, I have tried to rectify it all. I really had. I fought my father. I tried to be a better man.

From the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of a light pink dress. For a fraction of a moment, our gazes connected. I held her stare until she looked away. When she watched me, it sent warm awareness down my spine.

She narrowed her eyes before breaking our gaze and sauntering away with her head held high. My eyes remained locked on her, as they always did, and I watched her sneak off onto the terrace.

I excused myself, then stalked towards her. She sensed me before I had even spoken. If nothing else, she had good intuition.

“What do you want?” she spat out, without turning around to look at me.

“Just checking that you’re okay,” I drawled, my tone even.

My brother threw her under the bus earlier. His goal was to show her as ruined and easy, pregnant was an extra bonus, to make Callahan settle a debt by giving him Áine.

My teeth still fucking hurt from trying to keep my composure. She was pregnant. Fucker didn’t even give me a heads up. I sat flabbergasted, hearing the news that Margaret Callahan was pregnant. With my child!

The truth was that I didn’t like how Cassio had used her as a decoy. Of course, I would have liked it even less if he’d married Margaret instead of Áine. But if I said that to this woman, she’d run from me. At least now, she somewhat tolerated me.

Shit, things had gotten out of hand. Yet, I couldn’t find it in me to regret that shredded condom.

I’m going to be a father. I’m going to be a father. I’m going to be a father.

The words played on repeat in my mind, making my heart swell. I was happy about it. It’d tie the woman I obsessed over for years to me. I swear to fucking God, I’d be a good father. Nothing like Benito. I’d never let anything happen to my family and my woman. I certainly wouldn’t be the one to drive my woman to suicide, like Benito had done to my mother. I wouldn’t destroy my children like Benito tried to do to us.

Margaret slowly turned around, her elbows leaning against the high marble rail. Her eyes traveled up from my shoes until our eyes connected, a soft sneer curving her lips. Full of judgment and annoyance.

“And what will you do if I’m not okay?” she demanded, her tone full of sarcasm.

I slipped my hands into the pockets of my suit, leaned against the doorframe, and watched her. She wore the same expression she had the first time we met.

“I’ll make you better,” I deadpanned. I was serious too. That was my child in her belly. Our child. And I’d be damned if I let anything upset this woman. The problem was how to break it to her that she slept with someone she hated.

She snickered.

“The bastard son of Benito King could only make me worse,” she retorted. “I’d never stoop so low and let you touch me, Luca King.” *Ouch.* Okay, I could have gone without hearing such brutal honesty. “I wouldn’t touch you if you were the last man on Earth.”

Her words cut deep. The worst part. She wasn’t wrong. I was a bastard son.

“So that’s the only thing you hold against me?” I asked casually. Maybe she’d finally tell me that she remembered me from that cursed fucking day.

“You look too much like your father,” she snapped. “Behave like him too.”

Another dagger into my chest.

She strutted past me with a disdainful look in her eyes and just as she was about to step back inside the ballroom full of people, she glanced over her shoulders. “Get it through your thick Italian head once and for all, Luca King. You. Are. Not. My. Type.”

“Maybe you’re not mine either,” I said, keeping a bored expression on. “Especially not with the weight gain thing you’re about to have going on.”

It was a fucking lie. It’d only contribute to her appeal. Fuck, this was not the way to reel her in. Not unless I wanted her to punch me in the face.

She narrowed her eyes on me and her lips thinned before she flipped me a middle finger.

It reminded me of the night I first saw her in Temptation.

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Chapter Six

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MARGARET

Luca King.

Why did I always have to run into him? Okay, this was his brother's engagement party, that was almost mine, but still. Each time I turned around, he was somewhere close, watching me. It drove me nuts. Did he really have to follow me even out here?

The fucking playboy of New York. Casanova.

He'd seen more females' panties than most men had in ten lifetimes. The fucker was a goddamn dick and an asshole.

I'd never let him touch me.

But it was more than that. He reminded me of *him*. Benito King. I hated how the sight of him clenched my heart and brought back memories of betrayal. Of those who should have been the closest to me. To this day, I could still remember how the cold metal felt pressed against my throat.

Áine made fun of me and my hatred for knives. It wasn't until that night in Temptation that some of my fuzzy memories about the night my father died slowly came through.

Even now I could hear his laughter ringing in my ears as I stormed away from him that night two years ago. His parting words to my back were that he'd hunt me until he was inside me.

Except, every time I saw Luca, I saw his father. Blood. My father's dead eyes. The terror in his gaze. The pain that followed.

Ironically, it was Luca King who made me remember my mother's betrayal. She stood by and let her lover kill my Da. She was going to let Benito kill me too. Except for some reason, I survived.

No wonder I hated seeing Luca. He single handedly brought back bad memories every time. The bone chilling terror. The hate for knives was there all along, but now I understood why I preferred to deal with guns.

“What?” Luca drawled as he smoothed an absent hand down his tie as his eyes fell to my lips. “No other jabs, mia bella?”

The words were deep and soft. His eyes bore into me and my heart fluttered so fast, I feared a heart attack coming on. My cheeks heated with annoyance. At him. At myself.

At those fucking gorgeous eyes.

“See, I knew you could be sweet,” he said with conviction, cocking his brow in that arrogant way. “I bet you’re really sweet after you orgasm.”

Warmth ran through every inch of my body. A light shiver rolled down my spine and my thighs clenched.

Suddenly the memory of Las Vegas came rushing back and the similar words I got from my stranger. My baby daddy.

“I only had to fuck you to get your sweet side,” the stranger’s deep, raspy voice rumbled as I kissed his jawline, his lips. “I should have found you a lot sooner.”

Warmth flushed my face at the memory. It was my one night of being wild and free. It exceeded my expectations by a million. My only regret was that I didn’t ask for his name. But then I didn’t think I’d get pregnant either. We used protection, but that fucking condom that lay shredded. It was my doom.

I thought I’d be shackled to Cassio King.

And here I was talking to his crazy brother. He seemed to be everywhere, all the goddamn time.

Luca’s eyes were still on me, pulling me in like a tide that I couldn’t fight. A tide that’d swallow me whole. If I let him, he’d wreck me, slam me up against the rocky shore, and leave me to drown.

Just like his father had done to mine.

But I wouldn’t let him. Never trust a King was what my brothers always said, and I had to agree. I hadn’t told anyone what I remembered after that night in Temptation. Or of my suspicion that Cassio only used me to get to Áine.

The King brothers were just as cruel and conniving as their father.

If only I didn’t find Luca’s stupid eyes so damn fascinating. Most of the time, he wore a custom-made suit. Tall with wide shoulders and jet-black

hair and golden skin, he was popular with women. But it was his lips and eyes that sealed the deal. I couldn't stand the intense way he studied me.

Like he saw more of me than anyone else. Every time I saw him, he studied me, probably cataloging all my faults.

Those eyes got to me every goddamn time. Unlike Cassio's eyes, Luca had a hint of hazel in his eyes when you were close to him. There was something wild lurking in them that unsettled me. Rattled me.

I fucking hated it.

So I stayed the fuck away from him. The King family was the enemy.

So I left him behind without another glance.

I was a queen, moving onto bigger and better things.

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Chapter Seven

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LUCA

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Three Months Later

Margaret was almost five months pregnant. Her uncle and mother wouldn't stop finding candidates for my woman.

They should really stop lining up men for her to marry.

Hadn't they realized after the second fiancé died, there'd be no wedding? How many fucking men did I have to kill before they got the message?

It was my homage to the Halloween party at Temptation. My first rejection by a woman dressed as Black Widow. Of course, it was a private joke, and it was never my intent for others in the underworld to refer to her as a black widow.

I was seriously considering eliminating every single person that uttered those words. Maybe starting with her mother since the bitch liked to gossip.

A moan pulled me back to the problem at hand. Another fiancé.

This one was a big fucker. I thought I was tall, but this guy was a motherfucking giant. And I had to carry his big ass from my garage, down to my basement. Of all the goddamn times for the elevator in my building to be broken. Fucking city living. It'd be easier if I was in Sicily.

Pissed off at the elevator and the world, I made the idiot-slash-creep predator suffer even more. I started by cutting off his ears.

The screams of pain bounced against the walls. It was fucking annoying. This one was a bigger coward than the last fiancé. And I had no patience for the whiny prick.

The Callahan family should have done a better job finding suitable men for Margaret. They had to be desperate to marry her off. Not that it would make a difference, but if they'd find some decent ones, I'd only break their

legs and put them in the hospital. This guy was a cheater, a low ranking member of a fellow Irish mafia from Boston. This one liked to take out his anger on the weaker family members. Beating his sister. His little brother. Even his mother. Just because he didn't have a criminal record didn't make him a good match. That fucker would never get close to my baby.

"Please, please, spare me," he cried. "I'll do whatever you want."

God, he was pathetic. I often took on the role of an enforcer for my grandfather, but I had to admit, no man had ever cried as much as this one. He was too busy shitting his pants and pleading for his life, and giving me a pounding headache along the way.

"If you thought you'd get to live on the same planet as my daughter," I growled, "You have another thing coming."

My chest grew full as I thought back to the day of the last sonogram. That moment I saw my little, baby girl on the screen, I knew I'd tear this world apart to keep her safe. My obsession grew tenfold. And I knew Margaret would be a good mother. She read books to our unborn child as she sat in her rocking chair. She sang to her. Massaged her belly and read articles on healthy babies for hours on the internet.

Yes, I stalked her. I watched her through surveillance cameras. I bugged her home. Maybe it was morally questionable, but I did it to keep them safe. It gave me peace. We all did sketchy shit for the people we love. Right?

Angry at my self-doubt on doing the right thing, I transferred that fury onto this man.

I grabbed my favorite knife from my holster wrapped around my ankle.

"I'm going to plunge this knife into your chest and then slice you open," I declared calmly.

He shook his head, barely able to move his head. He laid with his back against the steel table, his head, torso and legs tightened with three belts, like he was ready for surgery. In a way, it was ironically appropriate considering what was in store for him.

"Or maybe I should start with your eyes," I said pensively, like I was seriously considering it.

He cringed, silently begging me not to do it.

This fucker was laughable.

And he thought he'd touch my woman and my child with his filthy hands.

“No, no, no,” he pleaded as snot ran down his nose and face. The guy was a mess.

The pitch of his screams turned higher with every inch the blade neared his eye. His overgrown, greasy coal hair was matted to his forehead. It made me sick to my stomach to think of him near my woman.

Okay, okay. Technically, she wasn’t mine yet, but she would be.

I was giving her space until she was ready.

God, I hoped it’d be soon. My balls were quickly turning bluish purple and threatening to fall off from all my jacking off.

Before my blade could touch his eyeball, he closed his eyelids as if that would protect them, but I let the tip of the knife scrape against it, drawing blood.

“Such a sensitive area,” I ground out, my anger bubbling under my skin. “Just one little nip and it bleeds like a bitch.”

“What have I done to you?” I almost laughed. Almost!

He continued crying and giving me a goddamn headache. I should be reading my latest book about natural births and looking for Lamaze class locations, not dealing with this shit.

“Well, first you dared talk to my woman,” I chirped. “Second, you thought you could actually marry her. And thirdly, you’re a pervert.”

“P-please.” He stared at me with beady eyes, blood and sweat smeared over his face. “I won’t marry her. I promise.” He stared at me like a little puppy pleading for a bone. “Please, don’t kill me. I have money,” he blubbered, spit sputtering down his mouth. “Set me free.”

I nodded, grinning like a lunatic.

“Sure, I’ll let you go.”

Then in one swift move, I sliced his throat and watched him gurgle his own blood, drowning in it.

It took him fifteen seconds to suffocate. Fifteen seconds for hope to vanish from his eyes.

“And this is how you end someone who thinks he’s worthy of my woman,” I deadpanned.

Margaret’s pale face, as that little girl and as a grown woman, flashed through my mind.

If only she knew, my conscience warned. *If she knew, she’d hate me more. More than my father. More than anything in this world.*

Shut. Up.

A conscience was a bitch sometimes. And it was something I didn’t need right now.

My hands curled into tight fists, my knuckles turning white.

Lamaze classes would have to wait. It’d be a long night getting rid of the body.

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Chapter Eight

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MARGARET

"Another one bites the dust," I muttered, rubbing my increasingly large belly and staring at nothing in particular. I was too far gone in my own thoughts to see anything. I was six months pregnant and things weren't going that great.

The whispers had started after my second fiancé died. People in the underworld had started calling me a black widow. Morons. We were never married so the logic made no fucking sense.

Pregnant. Single. No clue of who the baby daddy was.

Those were the only qualities that colored me lately. Of course, nobody but Áine knew I had no idea who my baby daddy was. I'd never admit it to anyone. Not even my brothers. And especially not my mother.

"Why are you so calm?" My mother was just about to lose her mind. Not only had I failed the family, but I got knocked up so the entire underworld had evidence to this family's shame.

I didn't care about my mother, but I loved my brothers. Even Uncle Jack.

"This bastard baby is a disgrace. A fucking shame," Mother hissed, her fingers gripping a rosary. She always held a rosary, like she was some damn saint.

Far from it, I snickered silently.

I lowered my eyes, my palm roaming my bump while I whispered silently to my baby girl she wasn't a shame. She'd be a princess. Strong and beautiful.

"Margaret!" Mother screeched. "Are you listening to me?"

She looked like she was about to keel over from the shame. I snickered again. Compared to her, I was eligible for sainthood.

Hate slithered through me, flicking a gaze her way. Her lips curled into a sneer. That sneer… I remembered it from before. Even after all this time, the nightmare of that day was fuzzy, but little things always triggered a new memory.

I couldn't breathe.

The hand tightened around my neck. I thrashed my arms and legs, desperate to throw Benito off and get some air into my lungs.

Snot ran down my nose. Tears blurred my vision. Dying… I'd die next to Da.

I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to escape the images flashing through my brain with a vengeance.

Father's dead eyes. Benito's vicious grin. Mother's ugly, twisted sneer.

My chest tightened and my vision swam with black dots.

Breathe, my mind whispered. *Breathe, Margaret.*

I retched without warning and threw up all over the living room rug. I retched again and again, my knees hitting the ground. Puke surrounded me, the stench of betrayal and our fucked up family reeked in the air.

I disgraced our family. I failed the head of the Callahan family, my uncle. Well, fuck them all.

Aiden entered the room just as I puked again, throwing up the last remnants from my stomach. He rushed to me and sank onto the floor next to me.

"What the fuck did you do?" he hissed, accusation clear in his voice. He held my hair back, while glaring at our mother.

"Nothing," she replied defensively. "We were discussing her marriage."

He eyed her suspiciously, but since I didn't deny nor confirm, he returned his attention to me. Getting a glass of water and handing it to me, I downed it with a long gulp, and all the while, my brother's hand rubbed my back.

"We'll figure it all out," he murmured, eyeing me worriedly. "You just get better." He ran a gentle hand over my hair, reminding me of another time. It was Aiden who found me in the pool of blood next to Da. He forgot a book and had a buddy drive him back.

As his friend drove us to the hospital, it was Aiden's words that comforted me. *"You just get better. For me. For those idiot twins. Just stay*

with us.”

I sat back on my heels, wiping my mouth clean with the back of my hand. Suddenly, exhaustion pulled on me. Pregnancy was work enough, but throwing up just drained me completely.

“I’m fine,” I murmured to Aiden, ignoring our mother.

She was just too dumb and self-absorbed to see that Cassio King wanted Áine all along. Not me. It was plain as day.

Of course, I never voiced that because I had no proof, but I’d bet all the money that I currently didn’t have that I was a diversion.

My mother put an indefinite block on all my accounts. So not only was I pregnant, I was also broke. I could say something to Aiden, but things were already tense.

I had to fight my own battles. Especially with that witch.

What fucking bullshit!

My heart tightened and tears burned the back of my eyes. These hormones were a killer. Everything made me cry. Good news. Bad news. No news.

“Margaret, are you listening?” she repeated, screeching loud, like a goddamn witch. A headache slowly formed behind my eyelids.

I shrugged. “No, I stopped listening at the part where you said the groom is dead.”

“This whole marriage bullshit has to come to a stop,” Aiden growled, glaring at our mother.

“Callahan demands it,” she spat out, a little too gleefully. “What? You think she has a choice?” she snickered. “I didn’t have a choice and neither does she. She will be dragged to that island, even if I have to drag her myself.”

Ignoring her, I shifted, readying to get up.

“Let me clean this up,” I rasped.

“Don’t worry about it,” he cut me off, then helped me to my feet. “I got it.”

“But–”

“Leave it to me, Margaret.” He ran a gentle hand over my hair, but anger raged in his eyes. Blue electric flames. “Go to your room and get some rest.”

For the first time in years, I listened without any come back.

I should have known it’d alarmed my oldest brother.

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Chapter Nine

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LUCA

Margaret was fast asleep, the window cracked, letting in a breeze. The sheer curtain rustled back and forth. The glow of the moon threw shadows over her face and my chest ached at the sight.

She was so fucking beautiful. Even when she scowled. But like this, with a serene expression and her lips slightly parted, her dark eyelashes resting against her pale cheeks, she was breathtaking.

She slept on her side, facing the window. One smooth thigh was outside of the covers and her pregnant belly stuck out. My fingers itched to touch it. I read *What to Expect When Expecting* from cover to cover, and I knew it would be around the sixth month that she'd feel the baby move.

Fuck, this was a clusterfuck.

Cassio fucked her over when he used her as a way to get Jack Callahan in the spot he wanted him so he could take Áine. And I, well, I just fucked her. I wanted to entrap her so she'd be mine.

Except, she couldn't stand me and the whole plan somehow backfired.

The security at her mother's place was just as lousy as it was twenty-three years ago. But then her mother purposely did that so she could have her lovers sneaking in and out without being noticed.

None of the Callahans knew I had security of my own on top of theirs. Breaking past their barriers was a piece of cake. Her brothers spent more time in their places in the city; otherwise they would have noticed there were two monitoring systems here.

But their loss was my gain.

After our first encounter at Temptation, I tried so hard to forget her, but I couldn’t get her out of my mind. I struggled to convince myself not to look into her. To leave her alone. I had already taken a lot from her.

The beast inside of me refused. I needed to learn more about her and about the woman she had become. So I started looking into her life and digging up everything I could find.

Of course, her little side gig with Áine never came up. Not until her cousin got caught red-handed.

But it was that night in Vegas that was my downfall. The moment I touched her, it was game over for me.

I watched her for way too long, probably baiting destiny. The problem was that she was too fucking beautiful to look away. Everything about her appealed to me. Her free laughter. Her eyes, the color of dark sapphires. Her hair was my weakness. Black as the night, silky, and I knew it smelled of oceans. Whatever shampoo she was using, I wanted to buy out the company.

She was so goddamn tempting.

No amount of self-lecture would work when it came to her.

After all, we had years of foreplay and banter. She even shot me during our second encounter. That day I decided I’d marry her. Some way. Somehow.

“You must have missed me, Callahan,” I drawled with a wide smile on my face. I was just on my way out of Temptation but seeing her made me weak. I’d been stalking the dark-haired beauty, but she hadn’t been back since our first encounter.

Her glare told me she wasn’t as happy to see me.

I let my eyes travel over her body. She wore a dark blue dress that enhanced the blue of her eyes. Like they needed any enhancement! It was the first thing people noticed about Margaret Callahan. Those big blue eyes that pulled you into the deep depths of the ocean and swallowed you whole.

“Where is your sidekick?” I questioned. Her and Áine were usually inseparable.

“None of your business,” she spat with a sneer.

“Ah, baby. Don’t be like that,” I drawled, my finger tracing her lower lip. Truthfully, I was surprised she let me touch her. “Nice dress,” I remarked. The dress was more than nice. It hugged her curves, giving you glimpses of the woman underneath it.

“Nice to know you like it,” she retorted dryly. “I’ll be sure to burn it the moment I get home.”

Amusement filled me. She loved to bait me. Even more, she loved bantering with me.

I leaned closer to her, towering over her. She never wavered, her gaze locked on me. The only betrayal of her state was the rise and fall of her chest and parted lips.

“Is banter your way of foreplay?” I asked her. “We both know where this is leading us.”

She scoffed.

“Don’t flatter yourself, Luca King. I’d rather jump into a swamp full of alligators than find myself in your arms.”

“Keep lying to yourself, baby.” My eyes locked on her full, red lips. She had the most tempting lips. Pouty. Full. Her bottom lip was slightly bigger than her top. “We both know you want me to spread eagle you, leaving you wide open for me to feast on you.” I was so close to her earlobe, I nipped it gently. “I’d eat your pussy like it was my last meal on this Earth. But it would be you screaming my name that would be my undoing.”

Her breathing labored, but she kept her expression impassive, refusing to show how my words impacted her.

Taking a step back, she raised an eyebrow. I could still smell her and feel her breath filling the space between us. There was too much space; I needed her closer. I took her wrist, feeling its fragile bones in my palm.

Something shuddered inside my chest at the thought of her being hurt by anything or anyone, including me.

“If you’d only let me, baby,” I purred, closing the distance and skimming my mouth over her soft cheeks. I felt a shiver roll through her body. For a moment, I thought she’d cave into this attraction that sizzled between us. She pressed against me and all the blood from my brain rushed to my groin.

I brushed my thumb over her lips. “From the moment I first crossed paths with you, I knew you were mine. Mine to fuck. Mine to fucking command, and mine to own.”

She smiled sweetly, but it was the look in her eyes that I missed. She parted her lips and I took it as an invitation to kiss her, my tongue brushing against hers. Wet. Hot. Just like her.

Her hand pressed against my chest. A small moan filled the air.

I was so lost in her that I missed her movement.

She pulled her head back and then smashed it against my nose. My grip on her wrist loosened and before I even moved, she pulled the gun out from my holster.

“Motherfucker,” she hissed. She pushed me, giving her enough space between us to raise my own gun and aim it at my leg. “Don’t ever touch me without my permission again.”

She pulled the trigger with a smug expression on her face. The bullet tore through my thigh and I fell down to my knees with a string of curses on my lips as I stared in shock at what she had done.

This woman was a savage. Crazy. Fuck, I liked her even more.

She leaned over, kissed me on the cheek and left me with a smile on her face. She kept my favorite gun too.

I ignored the people and murmurs of shock. “I’m going to marry you, Margret Callahan,” I gritted after her. She flipped me a bird over her shoulder. “Someway, somehow,” I muttered to myself.

Cassio found me just as Margaret disappeared from view. I told him some bullshit story of my faulty gun going off on its own.

He didn’t buy it, but he let it go.

The woman was truly a savage. My true match. But what captured me even more was her sweetness after she gave into me. I always wondered how sweet she’d be after an orgasm. If only I knew how addictive she could be, maybe I’d have thought twice about it.

Okay, I was lying to myself. I wouldn’t have hesitated to take her.

She was mine. She had always been mine.

I let my mind wander back to that night in Las Vegas. I had been living off that small taste I had of her that night. One touch and all my one night rules went out the fucking window. I wanted a lifetime rule with her.

God, that night with her was the best night of my life. The way she watched me, consuming me without even trying.

Her eyes shimmered even behind the mask. Those deep ocean blues pulling me in. It was a mermaid calling to a lonely sailor. Except, I knew only her voice and only her lips would work on me.

I claimed her mouth as her pussy clenched around my cock and her sweet ‘mmm’ noises were enough to get me hard again. My tongue slipped inside, claiming her hard and fast, like my cock did her tight pussy.

There was something basic, fundamentally animalistic about knowing I was her first. I decided right then as I spilled inside her with a violent shudder and staring into her eyes that I'd be her last.

I was obsessed before I fucked her. Now I was downright whipped as her lips curved into a soft, dazzling smile and she smoothed her hands up and down my back.

"You should have told me you were a virgin," I scolded her softly. "I'd have gone easier."

Her fingernails ran into the hair at my nape and it sent a chill down my spine.

*"That was perfect," she murmured softly as she trailed a finger down my neck. "**You** were perfect."*

I'd make this girl want me, need me, crave me.

If it was the last thing I did.

Until that night, I had never seen the soft side of Margaret Callahan. Even as my father choked her, she fought like a wildcat. Fuck, just the memory of that day sent sheer terror to the marrow of my bones.

The beating Father gave me for stabbing him in order to protect her was so fucking worth it, because she was here. Alive.

I leaned over her sleeping form and skimmed a thumb across her soft cheeks. Whenever she was near, it was easier to breathe. She made me feel alive for the first time in years.

Fuck, I *was* whipped with the mother of my child.

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Chapter Ten

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MARGARET

A family dinner with Uncle Jack.

The last thing I wanted was to participate in this shitshow. I wasn't in the mood to visit my uncle, or see my cousin and her new husband. Not because I didn't love them. But because I didn't want to face their judgment. Áine's mother looked down on me, like I was some kind of slut.

There was no sense in correcting her. I'd always been reckless. Everyone had always mistaken that for an easy skirt.

Pushing thoughts of my snobby aunt aside, and even more importantly, I wanted to plan my way out. The more I thought about it, the more certain I was of my decision. I refused to raise my daughter under the same roof as my mother.

But unless I shared my memories with my brothers and Uncle, she was here to stay. Truthfully, I'd be all for ratting her out at this point. Except, I had no evidence and no witnesses.

It'd be my word against hers. And Mother had never done anything wrong, while I, on the other hand, have done plenty of reckless things.

The car slowed down as it passed through the wrought-iron gates and carried on to the three-story-mansion.

My insides tightened, readying for battle. Okay, a slight exaggeration but my flare for dramatics was intensifying almost daily. Again, hormones.

As I exited the car and thanked the driver, I grimaced, flicking a glance at the elaborate manor. I hoped the King brothers wouldn't be in attendance,

but that was too much to hope for. Cassio was so fucking enamored with Áine, I was certain he admired her while she sat on the toilet.

I sighed. Gosh, I was getting meaner too with these hormones.

All this tension couldn't be good for the baby. I rubbed my belly, whispering soft promises as I climbed up the stairs. I intended to keep them. Da always kept his promises to me. I intended to do the same.

The home was regally white, welcoming, and disguising the blood of the underworld that every criminal organization harbored. Murder, lies, deceit, infidelity.

Uncle's home was decorated to the nines, hiding it all. Or like there was a wedding going on, not a simple family gathering. The decorations were gold, green, and red - the family crest colors.

Uncle Jack was the first one to greet me, waiting at the bottom of the stairs of the elaborate foyers.

"Is it Christmas in fall or maybe another wedding is going on?" I asked dryly.

He chuckled, like I just uttered the funniest joke ever. "I had hoped for yours," he remarked, then kissed me on the cheek. "Margaret, you're glowing," he beamed. It took all I had not to roll my eyes. Instead, I took a step back. "Baby is growing fast and furious, huh?"

"Yep."

My eyes skirted around the foyer. I hoped to disappear before his wife showed up.

Uncle let out a heavy sigh, probably knowing exactly what I was doing. "Listen, girl. I know you and your aunt haven't been getting along lately."

I scoffed. "That's the understatement of the century."

"Margaret."

A voice came from behind us and I tensed. Speak of the devil. Áine's mother married the Prime Minister of the UK. In one of her visits to the U.S. she hooked up with Uncle Jack and boom. The result was Áine.

"Still not married, I see." I sucked in an uneasy breath. God, I couldn't stand the woman. Maybe my own bad relationship with my mother was rubbing off with every other mother out there. I really hoped that wouldn't be the case with my own daughter.

An odd tightness to my chest was unexplainable. "Nice you could join us to celebrate Áine's five month anniversary."

My lips thinned, keeping the snappy words behind my lips.

I slowly turned and met her gaze. *Distaste*. Even after all these months, she held it against me. The fact that Áine had to step in to take the spot in the wedding arrangement with Cassio King. Despite the fact that the two couldn't keep their hands off each other.

"Has your mother decided who is next in line to marry you since the first couple didn't work out very well?" she asked casually, her eyes roaming over the guests. God, I hated her. I really did.

This woman was even more annoying than my own mother. Okay, that might be a stretch.

"Imagine in our day and age, people still insisting on a woman being married before having a baby." The familiar, annoying voice came from behind me. Agitation washed over me. I didn't need Luca King to defend me. "How positively boring," he added.

How positively boring. Did he really just say that? Maybe he was into *Downton Abbey*. *Or Bridgerton*, I snickered.

"Hello, mia bella." Luca's voice was almost a purr.

The back of my neck burned, but I counted to five before I slowly turned to meet the dark eyes with the hint of hazel in them. His gaze grabbed hold and hung on.

His suit was immaculate, as always. Smooth lines. Broad shoulders. Dark expression. And that constant smirk curving his lips. Awareness tickled in the back of my mind, holding that hazel gaze that spoke of darkness.

The flicker of hazel behind the mask.

Rough hands. Tangled sheets. Sweaty bodies.

His grunts. My moans.

I actually blushed, Luca taking it in with interest. His gaze flicked up and caught mine. It was invasive. It burned, like staring into a fire in the dark of night.

Something in my chest moved, then crackled and sparked.

Or maybe it was in my belly.

Yeah, definitely in my belly. Indigestion, I told myself, rubbing my belly. *Heartburn was big in pregnant women*.

"Margaret is too reckless to raise a child on her own," my aunt reasoned.

Contempt pulsed through my veins. At my family. At this situation. At the King family. At Luca King.

It was irrational and absurd, but I couldn’t help it.

“And you’re too stuck up to see what’s in front of you,” I said calmly, although I wanted to scream the words back at her. Anger bubbled inside me like a volcano, spreading fire and heat in my chest, needing to erupt, overwhelming all other senses.

Shaking my head, I left them standing there. *Let go of your anger.* Breathe in. Breathe out.

I headed through the foyer and deeper into the family room. Once upon a time, this was almost like a second home. Even before father’s murder, my brothers and I spent more time here than at home.

And after my father's death, we were here all the time. I came to think of Uncle as my parent, rather than my mother. This estate was my home.

Yet now, it felt like a battlefield.

“Maggie.” Áine’s voice traveled through the room. Pulling her hand out of Cassio’s grip, she rushed towards me. “It’s been forever. Can I touch my little niece?”

A long pause, then I nodded.

She had been the only one besides me and my brothers to feel the baby’s kicks. There were enough people to love my baby girl. Yet, nothing would persuade my uncle or mother to let me do this alone.

Her palm covered my growing bump. A soft kick. Then another.

“Oh my,” she gushed. “She’s a kicker, huh?”

I felt my lips curve into a smile. The baby was the only thing that made me smile anymore.

“Probably a looker too, like her mother.” Luca’s voice came from behind me and a groan slipped through my lips. “Maybe a little devil in her eyes after her father.”

Thick tension permeated the air. Suffocating and deafening.

Leave it to tactless Luca to bring up a father. The name every Callahan family member wanted. Including myself. It’d be nice to have that little piece of information for my baby girl when she was ready.

Instead, all I had was one clue. A Prince Albert piercing. It wasn’t exactly a smoking gun. But how could I face my little princess with only that piece of information for her paternity?

I couldn’t.

“Have you thought of a name?” Áine tried to break the silence.

I shook my head. I had gone through books and Google pages of names. None of the names spoke to me.

“She’ll have a strong Irish name, of course,” Uncle interjected. “After Grandma or Great-Grandma.”

I cringed. It wasn’t as if I hated Irish names, but I wanted a special, unique name for my baby girl. It didn’t escape me he didn’t reference my mother. It wasn’t as if she didn’t have a beautiful name. Although it was tainted by her actions. *Maeve* would forever be a hard pass for me as a name.

“Italian names are pretty cool,” Luca remarked.

God, how I loathed him!

“I don’t need your input,” I hissed under my breath, glaring at him. “So please, for the love of God, mind your business.’

A muscle in his jaw tightened.

“Hormonal, aren’t we?” he jabbed back, his tone dark.

I tensed, anger shooting through me. This guy acted like he was goddamn perfection. A God-given gift to women when he was everything a woman didn’t need. At least, a sane woman would think that.

“Don’t you have some woman to shack up with?” I snapped at him. “After all, it’s your only goal in life. Isn’t it?”

He shoved his hands into his pockets, his gaze trailing from my feet in hot pink ballet flats up my naked legs to my off white dress that came down to my knees. It was a clinical, almost bored expression.

Still, the touch of his stare burned and as I met his eyes and my heart stilled. There was something dark and hot behind his eyes.

Something familiar that I couldn’t quite put my finger on.

“Been there. Done that,” he drawled. “I’m finished with it. Now I’m looking for a wife.”

I narrowed my eyes on him. Why would he even think I cared about his bullshit plans?

“Luca, are you saying your playboy days are done with?” Áine teased. “You hear that, Maggie?”

“Yay,” I remarked sarcastically. “It’s a dream come true. Not!”

Áine watched me curiously, her brows furrowed.

“I hear you’re in the market for a husband,” Cassio deadpanned. “Maybe you should show more enthusiasm.”

If looks could kill, Cassio King would be dead. Right there and then. Motherfucker.

“Why?” I retorted back wryly. “Nothing associated with Benito King will ever get any enthusiasm from me. And you two are reminders to the world of Benito King.” Cassio’s expression darkened. “What’s the matter?” I fluttered my eyelashes innocently. “Was it something I said?”

“Maggie,” Áine reprimanded softly.

“How is your black widow status coming along?” Luca drawled, something dangerous in his tone. “Still tracking? Men falling at your feet. *Literally*. It’s so appropriate to the costume you wore way back when. Remember?”

He referred to the night Áine and I snuck into Temptation, the club Cassio owned. The first time Luca and I crossed paths. The worst thing that had ever happened to me.

“Shut up, you fucking bastard,” I hissed.

He grinned. “At least if I agreed to marry you, I wouldn’t keel over or let anyone end me before the wedding night.”

My hand flew through the air and was just about to make contact with his face when he caught my wrist.

“Ah, mia bella, I thought you were smarter than to let emotions lead you.”

Anger heated my cheeks. I attempted to yank my wrist out of his hold but his grip was firm. Animosity slithered through my veins and filled the air.

“I despise you,” I breathed. “I’d rather touch a snake than you, Luca King,” I said, heatedly. “I don’t sleep with bastards who don’t know when to shut the fuck up or who have shagged the entire female population of the East Coast.”

Luca’s gaze narrowed in distaste. “Would you prefer I fucked someone in the west?” he countered. “In Vegas perhaps?”

My heart skidded to a halt. Why would he say that? Nobody knew what happened in Vegas except for Áine, and she’d never share that with anyone. None of my family knew when or where my hook-up happened.

“I don’t give a shit what you do, Luca King,” I gritted, yanking my wrist out of his hold. “As long as it’s out of my sight.” God, I couldn't stand him. His smirk. His persistence. His good looks. His cologne. “And please,

keep your distance. I can't have you breathing too close to me and infecting my child."

Cassio growled and looked like he was about to curse me. Okay, that was kind of rude. And mean. Except whenever Luca looked at me like he knew me, I wanted to prove to him that he didn't.

My hate was strong, bitter. One spark and it'd ignite through this room, consuming everyone.

"I hate your guts," I gritted.

His teeth clenched. His jaw tightened. His gaze, unimpressed with my words, studied me. It traveled over every inch of me, studying the curves of my body, then came back to my face. His eyes darkened and flashed with something unmistakably sinful.

I shook off a shiver. He noticed it, his gaze turning warmer and heavier. This man saw too much. He wanted too much.

Luckily, my brothers strode in at that moment, like three Irish gangsters from *Peaky Blinders*, pulling everyone's attention to them.

Aiden sensed the tension, his gaze sharp on the King brothers.

"Ah, there is my baby sister," Aiden greeted, flicking his aunt an apathetic glance and walking right by her without acknowledgement. He was still pissed at her and one thing that none of the Callahans did easily was forgive and forget.

My brothers grinned at me and pulled me into a hug. It felt like being a hot dog among three big bodies.

"Why didn't you wait?" Kyran scolded softly.

"We could have all come together," Aiden grumbled in a low voice. "I don't like you alone among the wolves."

My eyes flickered and caught the King brothers' wary eyes on me. Nico Morrelli and his wife just arrived, but they kept their eyes on me and my brothers.

"I can handle them," I murmured softly, touched by my brothers' protectiveness.

"I know, but I love driving my niece," Kyran remarked. "She has to get used to my awesome driving."

That was another thing about my twin brothers. They raced their cars and sometimes applied their skills to everyday driving. I was used to it, but many weren't. Most got car sick or terrified. Not me. I freaking loved it. But since I'd gotten pregnant, I've had reservations about being reckless.

“You know you love our driving,” Tyran chimed in, shoving his shoulder into his twin brother. “Stop being clingy and let me hug her in peace.”

I rolled my eyes as Aiden shoved both of them out of the way and pressed his mouth on my forehead. “How are you feeling?”

“Aiden, you just saw me this morning.”

“They are being overbearing big brothers.” Bianca Morrelli wobbled over to us, her belly twice the size of mine. She was pregnant with twin boys. Like having twin girls wasn’t bad enough. “Trust me, I know how annoying they are.”

She gave a pointed look at her own brothers, Cassio and Luca King. That family tree was complicated as fuck.

“We’re not annoying,” Luca drawled, looking at her affectionately. This side of the King brothers was new to me, and it was hard for me to trust it. We learned months ago that the King brothers had a sister, but the novelty of it still hadn’t worn off. “We’re just looking after you. You know, in case we need to kill your husband.”

The mischievous smile on Luca’s face caught me unprepared. It was disarming and something hesitant flickered in my stomach. I immediately shoved it aside.

“The day you successfully kill me, Luca King, will be the day that hell freezes over,” Nico said dryly, his hand wrapping around his wife’s growing waist. “My girls and boys are gonna kick your ass if you touch a single gray hair on my head.”

A round of chuckles followed.

“I think the girls are rapidly aging him,” Bianca remarked sheepishly. “They attempted to break into his safe.”

“Good girls,” Cassio and Luca said at the same time. “If they succeed in breaking into Morrelli’s safe, they’ll be able to rob anyone.”

“I’ll reward them,” Luca grinned. “Double the money they get out of the safe.”

Bianca groaned. Áine and I shared an amused glance.

“Teaching them to steal isn’t good parenting,” my aunt reprimanded.

“Funny you’d focus on that considering most people in this room are killers,” I remarked dryly.

“Margaret Callahan–” she started, but was quickly cut off.

“Don’t you even fucking start,” Aiden growled softly. The threat in his voice and in his gaze was clear. He’d had enough.

“Everyone shut it,” Uncle ground out, cutting us all off. His jaw was clenched and a storm brewed in his eyes. “This has gone on for far too long.”

Aiden took a drink, a shadow of something dark passing beneath the frozen oceans of his gaze.

The twins’ gazes had hardened from amusement to steel as they let out a low growl.

“Tell that to your wife,” Tyran hissed. “She’s been on my sister’s case for months. So look to your fucking left and handle that shit.”

My eyes burned. My brothers made me so proud and their love just made my heart clench in warmth. Jesus, the last thing I needed right now was to start bawling.

Palpable tension stole the oxygen in the room. My brothers wouldn’t back down. They never did. And even if I was wrong, they’d stand by me. Cassio and Luca observed with interest, but they wouldn’t intervene.

Áine looked slightly annoyed.

“I hate to say it, but it’s time you let it go, Mum,” she finally broke the silence. “I told you it all worked out for the best.”

“No, what Margaret did was wrong and you paid the price.” God, my aunt could be such a bitch.

But I’ve had enough. I wouldn’t put up with this shit. Not against me and not against my daughter. I squared my shoulders and locked my eyes on Cassio.

“She was the end game all along,” I finally declared. There was no accusation in my voice. No bitterness. Just a statement.

I refused to back down, my eyes narrowed on my cousin’s husband. He didn’t seem bothered.

“Wasn’t she?” I demanded to know.

“She was,” he answered, his voice cold. There was no apology in his tone nor his dark gaze. Not that I expected it, nor wanted it.

Turning my attention to my aunt, I glared at her.

“There you go, Aunt,” I declared victoriously. “No matter what I did, you cannot hold this shit against me. If you can’t get past it, I’m out of here. I don’t need this shit.”

She sighed, but I could practically hear my uncle's teeth grinding under his clenched jaw.

"No, you are not out of here. You're my niece. We're a family. We'll work this out and move on."

I smirked at his words.

"Work what out?" I demanded to know. "As far as I know, it's your wife that can't seem to let it go. She didn't want her daughter as part of this underworld. But she sure as fuck didn't mind screwing around with the men in it." My uncle growled and his expression darkened, but I was too far gone to be cautious. "And she sure as fuck didn't mind reaching out to the mafia when it was convenient."

My aunt's face turned red, the usually elegant woman colored by fury. "How dare you–"

I took a step forward, getting right into her face.

"Stop acting like you're better," I snapped. "You married into this shit. Look at your husband. He's running the goddamn mafia, not parliament."

Yes, I knew I was out of line. I was being a bitch. But fuck it, I'd had enough.

Uncle shook his head.

"Margaret, firstly you won't talk to my wife like that." Uncle was furious, but his rage didn't compare to mine. I could feel everyone's eyes darting back and forth, holding their breaths. My brothers were at my back, like a shield ready to protect. "Secondly, my wife *will* apologize for the hard time she has given you."

The expression on my aunt's face said she would rather die than apologize. And suddenly, I've had it with everything and everyone.

"You know what?" I scoffed, fury boiling through my veins. No matter what I did or tried, nothing would ever be good enough. In my aunt's mind, I destroyed her dreams for Áine. "Don't fucking bother. Because I'm done with this family. I'm done with you. It was you and your darling wife that made the bloody wedding arrangement without talking to me. Did I complain? No. Despite the fact that the King family murdered–" I cut myself short. I almost slipped. "They prey on innocents. Kill them." Then I narrowed my eyes on my aunt. "But one fucking thing didn't go her majesty's way, and I'll never hear the end of it."

"Margaret, don't–" My uncle tried to pacify the situation, but it was so far past that point that there wasn't much he could say or do.

“Save your breath, Uncle,” I cut him off. “I’m leaving.”

“Maggie, please don’t,” Áine pleaded and guilt swelled in my chest.

But I couldn’t stay, not even for her. Apparently, my brothers were of the same opinion because they followed close behind me.

I walked to my cousin and pressed a kiss on her cheek. It felt like a goodbye.

“I’ll talk to you next week,” I told her softly. Although, that might not be true.

Because I had already made up my mind.

I’d disappear.

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Chapter Eleven

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LUCA

I left the Callahan manor barely five minutes behind Margaret.

The reason for my visit stormed out so there was no point in hanging about. I descended the stairs and my steps came to a halt.

"Son of a bitch," I muttered.

My goddamn car sat in the middle of Callahan's lawn. On fire.

"My favorite fucking car," I grumbled as I neared the blazing inferno. There were remains of red lipstick on the windshield. The flames flickering around it, consuming the vehicle.

TIME FOR ANOTHER BULLET?

I shook my head. She certainly knew how to push my limits. I shrugged it off and planned my revenge. Retaliation was out of the question. She was pregnant with my child. But it didn't mean I couldn't teach my woman a lesson through her brothers since they clearly helped her. And she loved them very much.

Dark and unwanted jealousy slithered through my veins.

You knew things were bad when you were jealous of her brothers.

I FOUND HER BROTHERS, just the twins, in The Eastside, the Irish pub that belonged to Liam Brennan. The fuckers were lucky not to be in their own bar because I would have set that establishment on fire.

Be that as it may, I didn't need to start shit with Liam Brennan. So I waited. And waited. Leaning against my not-favorite car, I conducted

business while watching drunks stumble out of the bar.

I didn't have to wait long to spot the twins, a little blonde bombshell squeezed between them, eager to get fucked five ways to Sunday.

Not today, sweetheart.

"Hello, boys," I greeted them, my gun discreetly pointed at Tyran. Or maybe it was Kyran. It didn't fucking matter to me. Those two would rather die than allow anything to happen to the other. Flicking a look to the blonde who was already panting like she was in heat, I added, "Sweetheart, you run along." When she didn't move, I growled. "Right the fuck now."

That got her going. She glanced over her shoulder. "Call me."

Idiot!

Margaret's twin brothers were worse than me when it came to whoring. She'd have barely gotten a fraction of a night.

The twin's jaw ticked almost in sync, but neither one of them said a word. The knowledge of why I was here was written in their eyes. Those blue eyes that reminded me of the woman I wanted. And that pissed me off even more.

"Your car or mine?" I drawled.

Tyran shrugged. "I thought your car was a bonfire last I saw it."

A burn traveled through my veins. So I hit him. Hard.

Why in the fuck wait?

Kyran attempted to attack, but I pointed the gun at him. "I wouldn't if I were you. I'm going to teach you a lesson, but I won't hesitate to kill you if I have to."

That was a bold faced lie but they didn't need to know that. Besides, I had one sin weighing down on me. The death of Margaret's father.

Kyran put his hands up in the air, but his gaze remained locked on me and his brother. One wrong move and he wouldn't hesitate to end me.

So I hit him, too. Hard.

His body slumped against the pavement as he lost consciousness. It was safer for him that way.

"You fucking bastard," Tyran growled.

"Don't worry, prick. Your time is coming too."

His teeth clenched, but he didn't say another word. He wore a darkly entertained expression as he studied me for my weaknesses. I didn't have many. Aside from his sister. Again, that was on a need to know basis and *nobody* needed to know that.

“Whose idea was it to burn my car?” I demanded to know.

The door of the nightclub opened and with it the blasting music traveled our way.

“Mine,” he gritted.

It was totally not his. The twins could be reckless but not that crazy. Besides, they knew I could start a war for it. Not that I would. I wanted Margaret protected, not in the midst of bloodbath.

“You sure?”

“Yes.”

Satisfaction filled my chest that he’d protect his sister at all cost.

So instead of beating him up more, I turned to the line of cars. “Which one is yours?”

It took him a second too long to answer. “Aston Martin.”

I grinned. “Ahh, a James Bond fan?”

He didn’t answer. But I did shoot out all his tires and then put a bullet into his windshield.

“Count yourself lucky. Next time it will be your brain.”

Once I married Margaret, family dinners would be joyous affairs.

I could see it already.

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Chapter Twelve

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MARGARET

I stared out the window, the Atlantic ocean stretching as far as the eye could see. The water was rough, the hurricane out at sea resembling the state of my soul. It was the first week of September and the second hurricane of the month was already at work. Back to back.

While Uncle Jack preferred to stay in the city, my family home was in Long Island. My mother hated visiting Uncle. Oftentimes she even refused to go into the city. Maybe back then she feared running into Uncle. Or maybe Benito, her secret lover.

I'd really like to know what the hell the story was there. Digging through my mother's things provided no answers. Reading through her journal even less so. There were abbreviations and statements that made no sense throughout her journals.

Anyhow, none of it mattered any longer. I'd leave it all behind soon - one way or another.

I stood still by the window, watching the horizon mocking me with the freedom that was so close yet so far away. The sun set over the horizon, creating shadows of light. So fucking appropriate since there were shadows in my life that I could practically feel lurking all around me.

Sensing eyes on me, I huddled to the corner of the window, behind the shutters, letting my gaze wander over the tree line on the corner of the property. The side that I usually ignored, because the ocean was more tempting.

It was then that I saw a shadow. He cocked his head, turning his face up and staring straight at me. Ever so slightly, he raised his chin, but the

moonlight wasn’t bright enough. It kept shadow over his features.

Yet somehow, his gaze pierced me anyway. It felt like sharp little needles grazing my skin. A flash of teeth, his mouth stretching into a wicked, self-satisfied smirk. My breath hitched in my throat, and my lungs filled with the heat of an inferno.

I held my breath and before I could figure out what to do, he turned around and walked away. Slowly. Purposeful.

The mysterious deaths of my fiancés had something to do with me. I was certain that I was somehow the end game. Except, I couldn’t even fathom why. After the fuck up with Cassio, which I felt in the grand scheme of things wasn’t even my fault, I accepted my fate. I’d marry a decent Irish man who’d help me raise my daughter.

I couldn’t decide whether or not I was happy that I was having a girl. Men fared much better than women in this world. Especially in the underworld. On the other hand, I loved the idea of having a little girl. I’d protect her and keep her away from the mafia. She was meant for something better. I’d guarantee it no matter what it cost me.

This life had never bothered me. Not until I was told who to marry. I should be able to decide who I would tie my life to or even if I wanted a husband at all. My daughter would never have to go through what I have if I have my way. How many times should one person have to be treated like a commodity before enough was enough? Starting with Cassio and ending with the last schmuck. At least Cassio was alive, the last four all died under mysterious circumstances.

It didn’t bode well for my reputation.

A heavy sigh left me. The demand by my uncle that I should marry and cutting off my access to all my funds until I was a married woman was a goddamn nightmare. It wasn’t my fault those fucking men dropped dead like flies. I had nothing to do with it. It was as if he was accusing **me** of killing them.

Ugh, I had to get the hell away from here.

If I could at least get some of that money, I could get out and start fresh somewhere.

“What are you up to, Maggie?”

I whirled around at hearing my oldest brother’s voice. Aiden was the oldest of my three brothers. Also, my favorite. Of course, I’d never admit it to anyone. I loved all three of my brothers. Tyran and Kyran, being the

twins, more often than not, had their own thing going and shared everything. Sometimes I swore they even shared a girlfriend.

Although I had no proof, I was pretty sure my suspicions were correct. Once, when I called them out on it, they just shrugged, shared a look, and walked away. If that wasn't confirmation, I didn't know what was.

"Nothing," I answered my eldest brother.

He narrowed his eyes, blue like mine. He waited but when I refused to elaborate, he shook his head.

"Do I need to tell you I know you better than you know yourself?" he grumbled.

I rolled my eyes. "Do I need to tell you that you're not my father?"

A dull ache pierced through my chest. *Da.* My father. His words rang in my ears. *I'll always know what you're thinking, mo chailin milis. And you'll always know that I love ya.*

He always called me 'my sweet girl' and it always made me smile.

"I'm not Da," Aiden agreed. "But you can tell me anything."

Anything. Everything. Nothing.

Except that I couldn't tell him *this*. The disconnected memory of Da's death and Mother's betrayal. I couldn't remember how I got to the hospital. I couldn't remember how we even got home after Da picked me up from school. So how could they possibly believe me when I say Mother had a hand in Da's death.

"About the baby, Maggie–"

I let out a heavy breath, then stopped him. "Aiden, if you're going to ask me for the name of the baby's father again, don't bother."

He shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans and leaned against the wall. The movement reminded me of someone, but I couldn't quite recall who. Not that it mattered.

"I wasn't going to ask about the baby daddy," he stated calmly. "But I know when you're up to something. And you're up to something."

The thought has been brewing in my mind for a while but I didn't know how to make it happen. So technically, I wasn't up to anything. Not yet anyhow.

"I know that you're ten years older than me, Aiden," I remarked instead. It was better than lying to him. "But that hardly makes you smarter than me," I added with a smirk hoping to divert his attention from me and my thoughts.

He scoffed, then pushed off the wall and walked over to me. He was tall, six foot three, and towered over me with an unreadable expression. Except I knew Aiden like the palm of my hand. While to strangers he was a threat, to me, he was just an overprotective brother.

He led me out onto the balcony despite the bitter wind sweeping off the ocean. Once we stood by the rails, he turned to me.

“You’re running, aren’t you?” Guilt washed over me. It would seem my brother knew me a lot better than I even gave him credit for. I trusted him with my life, but with this, I wasn’t so certain. So I hesitated.

Aiden always had my back, but he wanted me close too. He worried about letting me spread my wings. And yes, he stood up to Uncle and his wife in my defense.

But when it came to the mafia business and making alliances, Aiden followed Uncle’s decrees. It was the reason he’d taken over more and more responsibilities. He’d take over Uncle’s criminal organization soon.

Sensing my dilemma, he raised his hand and swept a finger over my nose. Just like when I was a little girl and something upset me.

“Maggie, I'm on your side. No matter what.”

“I can’t handle another fiancé,” I croaked.

He nodded. “Okay.”

The last flicker of hesitation dimmed and nothing could hold my words back anymore.

“I can’t do this,” I breathed. “I don’t know why these men keep dying, but I cannot accept another. I’m done.”

I was born into this underworld, but I didn’t want to die in it. And whoever was killing these men… my sixth sense warned I was the reason. Some days I could almost feel his gaze piercing me from the shadows. Like earlier.

Who was that stranger?

“I’ll talk to Uncle,” he said. “I’ll make him see reason. End the parade of prospects.”

I sighed.

“I want out. Out of this world. Out of any future arranged marriages. Just out. For my baby and me.”

Understanding flickered in his blue gaze and he pushed his hand through his coal dark hair. Our coloring was so identical, there was no mistaking our relations. But character wise, the two of us were very

different. I was impulsive and wild. Aiden was not. I got into trouble quite frequently growing up and someone always had to rescue me. Aiden got into trouble, but he always got out of it on his own.

“So you want to run,” he stated calmly. It should have sent an alert through me, but it didn’t. At this point, I had nothing to lose. Without help, I won’t be able to leave this prison. “But you need funds.”

The wind had picked up and tore at my hair. A shiver rolled through my body. Either from the thought of being completely alone or due to the wind, I wasn’t sure.

“Yes.” There was no reason to beat around the bush.

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely,” I said. I didn’t bother telling him that being alone terrified me. Growing up in our Irish family meant always being surrounded by someone. Parents. Brothers. Cousins. Uncles. Aunts. There was never a dull moment. If you wanted to be alone, you locked yourself in a bathroom.

“It’s a huge step,” he noted, scratching his jaw as if he was going through all the bullet points I should know.

“I’m aware,” I remarked dryly. “But I can’t do another engagement party. Another round of congratulations while being called a black widow under their breaths.”

“If you give me their names, I could easily kill them,” he said with a casual smile. So typical of someone in the mafia to throw that out.

“Well, you’d have to kill a good number of our own family,” I retorted wryly. “I don’t even like the idea of marrying someone just because I’m pregnant.”

My hand came to my stomach and I rubbed it affectionately. Feeling the baby move inside my stomach was an indescribable feeling. I fell in love with my daughter twice so far. The day I saw her little blip on the sonogram and the day I felt her move inside me. From then on, I’d do anything, and I mean anything, for her.

Steal. Cheat. Kill. Anything.

“Why can’t I just have the baby on my own?” I murmured, talking to myself.

“Because our family is very old fashioned,” Aiden stated matter-of-factly.

“I bet if you get a girl knocked up, they’ll do whatever you say.”

He didn’t bother correcting me. We both knew they’d do whatever Aiden said or decided. They learned early on that a sure way to lose their sons was to enforce their will on them. Mother couldn’t discipline or control the boys, so I ended up getting a double dose of all her disciplinary actions.

Life just sucked sometimes.

“Can you help me?” I rasped, locking eyes with him.

If circumstances were different, I’d hide my desperation. But I had to do this. It was for my girl. So she could get a taste of freedom and a happy life. Not the one bound by the Irish mafia.

“Fuck,” he grumbled. “I’m going to be in pig shit if it ever comes out.”

Hope lit up in my chest. “It won’t,” I said quickly. “Nobody will ever know. I won’t tell anyone. Not even Áine.”

Aiden shrugged. “Honestly, I don’t give a shit if the world knows. I’ll put them all in their place. Arseholes.” My lips curved at his response. That was so my brother. Up for any challenge. “I’m curious, how come Áine didn’t help you?”

I swallowed. My brothers and her would be the hardest thing to leave behind. Money too but mainly them.

“I didn’t dare ask her,” I admitted softly. “She’d help me, but I didn’t want her to keep a secret from Cassio and Uncle Jack.”

A sardonic breath left him. “Well, it was Uncle Jack who put you in that predicament. And Cassio King fucked you over. So he owes you big time.”

That was neither here nor there. I wouldn’t dwell on the past. It’d get me nowhere. I had to think about the future.

“Would the baby's father be willing to go with you?” Aiden asked quietly. “I hate for you to be alone.”

Tears burned in the back of my eyes. A lump formed in my throat, threatening to get me sobbing. Pregnancy had made me so goddamn emotional that I was getting on my own nerves. Never mind anyone else’s.

Suddenly, Aiden pulled me into his chest and the tears won. My body shook with sobs and my brother’s comfort only made me cry harder. It made no fucking sense. I haven’t even lost my family yet but I mourned the loss. Brothers. Cousins. Even my mother for all her hard-ass ways.

“We’ll get through this,” he murmured into my hair. “First we end this line up of men for you to marry. Think of it as a vacation until we get

through all the bullshit. One day, we'll all sit by the fire, share tales of our adventures and yours might be the greatest one of all."

Above us the sky suddenly thundered, the first signs of an impending rainstorm.

It was the first omen of the bad things to come.

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Chapter Thirteen

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LUCA

I watched Margaret saunter into the building of her Ob/Gyn, her mouth wrapped around the straw of her fruit smoothie. She had been drinking those like they were going out of style.

Once she was inside, I made my way into the building too. I used the staircase reserved for employees of the building. Benefits of buying out the business of the top obstetrician in the country.

Her family wanted her to be treated by their family doctor but he suddenly became “unavailable,” courtesy of my bribe. I lined up Dr. Calabro who was one of the best. She also happened to be on my payroll.

She kept me up to date on Margaret’s and baby’s progress. It also allowed me to be present at all Margaret’s doctor’s visits. Unbeknownst to her.

I took my normal spot in the room behind the one where Margaret would be seen. Just as I took my usual spot, the door opened and I watched through the window as Margaret made her way into the room. The only thing that separated me from her was the one way glass that would allow me to observe the appointment.

“You must be the fastest or best organized doctor on this planet,” Margaret observed. “I have yet to even pick up a magazine when I come for my appointments.”

My lips curved up. She didn’t know she was getting preferential treatments. The doctors figured the sooner they saw her and she was out the door, the sooner they got rid of me.

“We pride ourselves on our efficiency,” Dr. Calabro lied with a smile on her face. The woman couldn’t stand me but she liked Margaret. I fell from her graces when I made her see Margaret through her appointment rather than rush to her emergency C-section she was supposed to perform.

“You know the drill,” Dr. Calabro told her, smiling as she slipped on a pair of latex gloves.

Margaret started to shed her clothes so that she could put on the disposable paper gown. I should avert my eyes. It was the least I owed her, but I didn’t. Instead, I admired every inch of her rounder, softer body. She was gorgeous.

Her skin was smooth, the color of ivory. She shimmied out of her plain silky panties, pushing them down her legs. Her ebony hair spilled over her back as she bent over, those toned legs tempting me.

Jesus Christ!

All the blood rushed to my groin. My heart galloped in my chest and I almost started panting, my cock half-hard. This craving to touch her was like a drug taking up permanent residence in my veins.

An obsession I’d never be able to overcome.

I longed to run my fingers through her hair as she wrapped her lips around my cock and looked up at me with her beautiful eyes.

She slipped her gown on, her eyes flickering to the window. As if she could sense my eyes on her.

I couldn’t help but wonder how things would be if she’d just stop fighting me. Hating me. If she’d only let me be part of her life. I wanted to rub her back, feed her cravings, and feel our child move inside her womb. We’d come together for every appointment, dreaming of our baby’s future.

Instead, I was fucking missing it all.

Much to my dismay, she seemed to have come to terms with having our baby alone. The stubborn woman refused to ask anyone for help.

Sitting herself on the examination table, she laid back. I watched as the doctor listened to her heartbeat, then took her blood pressure. Then she used the ultrasound machine to listen to the baby’s heartbeat and see her move.

My little girl came onto the black and white screen and my heart clenched. But it was that whooshing sound of the baby’s heart that got me every goddamn time. It was the best music on this planet. I ensured Dr. Calabro recorded those sessions every time, so I could give them to my little girl one day.

I watched as Margaret's neck bobbed and her deep ocean blue eyes misted. She quickly wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

"You alright?" Dr. Calabro asked her. Usually Margaret kept her emotions in check, buried somewhere deep down where nobody could see them. I'd imagine it was only her brothers that usually saw the soft side of her.

Fuck!

I craved to see it. Like that night in Vegas. A fleeting moment. That little tenderness showed me more than all her harsh words how much she hid herself.

"Can I touch it?" she murmured, her eyes locked on my hardware. I wished the masks were off. I wanted to see her whole face. I wanted her to ***see*** *me. This night with her was even more explosive than anything I had imagined.*

And I had imagined plenty.

She lowered herself down my body, her eyes never wavering from my cock. My dick twitched, ready for another round with her. I had just finished cleaning her and then myself from her virgin blood. Jesus Christ, she was a virgin.

Mine! Those were the words that chanted on repeat in my brain.

Mine. Mine. Mine.

Obsessive possession didn't come close to describing what I felt for this woman.

"There's nothing that I'd like more," I rasped.

Her soft hand palmed my rigid length and I was a goner. I knew I'd have to have her again, but first, I let her study my piercing.

"Did it hurt when you had it done?"

"A bit." Controlling myself from rutting her right now hurt worse, but I didn't think she'd appreciate those words.

Then she shocked the fucking hell out of me as she leaned over and ran her tongue over my length, pausing at the piercing. Her tongue swirled around it and I lost my fragile control. My hips bucked, thrusting into her warm mouth.

She moaned and I pushed my fingers into her hair so I could watch her as she bobbed her head up and down.

"Your eyes," I grunted. "Look at me when you suck my cock."

She immediately obeyed. It was the only time this woman obeyed me. Of course, she didn't know it was me.

"Fuck." The sensation of her hot mouth around my dick sent a shudder rippling through my entire body. I just fucked her and I almost shot my load again, this time into her mouth right there and then. "If I get too rough, tap my thigh."

Margaret hummed, then blinked up at me, her eyes watering from my size.

Christo Santo.

I never fucking cursed in Italian but with her, my brain ceased working.

She started licking and sucking, slowly at first, but then built up to a rhythm that had her head bobbing up and down. While she may have been a virgin when we started, it was clear her mouth hadn't been one. Fuck! She knew how to please me.

My fingers gripped her hair and my other hand shot to the back of her head.

"That's it," I growled. "Suck that cock."

She moaned and the vibration from her throat traveled up my spine. I started thrusting my hips into her, faster and harder. The only sounds in the room were my ragged breaths, flesh slapping against flesh and gagging coming from her throat.

Her nails dug into my thighs but she never tapped out.

I pulled out of her and rolled her on her back. A surprised squeal escaped her when I slammed into her tight pussy.

"Ohhhh," she moaned. Fuck, she was soaking wet.

She was my manna. My heaven. My salvation.

I fucked her hard. I feared breaking her, but every time I eased up, she growled and her nails dug into my shoulders.

"More," she pleaded, her pleasure-glazed eyes watching me. I was grateful her mask didn't hide that from me.

I thrust faster and deeper, feeling her fall apart around me with moans until I too came apart in the most powerful orgasm I had ever felt. It ripped through me with such intensity that I feared we'd both disappear.

At the sound of Margaret's voice, memories vanished and consequences remained.

"Yes, I'm fine," Margaret assured her. Her words pulled me back to the present. "I just–" She swallowed, her delicate neck moving lightly. "I just

never thought much about having kids. And now, it's indescribable, and I have nobody to share it with."

If only she'd let me help her. If only she'd want me as much as I want her. I'd share it all with her. The good, the bad… fucking everything.

"You're sharing it with me," the doctor said gently. Dr. Calabro found her soft heart somewhere in her white coat. Or maybe because she knew I was here watching, she hoped to get into my good graces. She knew I owned the practice now because her father fucked up. "The baby is healthy. You're healthy. Sometimes we have to count small blessings to know we're the lucky ones."

"You're right," Margaret agreed. "These pregnancy hormones are a killer," she choked out with feigned humor. "By the way, any chance I could get another refill of prenatal vitamins?"

Dr. Calabro frowned. "Didn't I just give you a box last week?"

Margaret lowered her eyes, suddenly very interested in studying her nails. "I might miss our next appointment so I wanted to make sure to have enough."

The doctor's brows furrowed. "Anything I should know?"

"No. Just a precaution."

It wasn't. My girls were running.

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Chapter Fourteen

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MARGARET

Guilt crashed down on me.

Uncle wouldn't hear of the possibility of leaving me unmarried. He was already lining up the next prospect. Aiden was risking a lot by helping me.

My brother had organized everything for me. He got me enough cash to last me a year. He lined up a hotel to stay at before I'd head to a little cottage in the remote part of Northern Italy where the only inhabitants seemed to be old people, olive trees, and goats.

Yes, goats.

Aiden drove his motorcycle like a madman, fighting Long Island traffic. Riding a motorcycle while pregnant wasn't the best decision, but it was the only way to ensure we'd get to the airport on time. We couldn't risk luggage so all I had was a Vera Bradley large backpack with necessities to get me going and fifty grand safely secured in one of the inside pockets. The zipper Aiden had installed even had a lock so there'd be no accidents.

"I've always wanted to visit Italy," I joked, speaking into the microphone of the helmet.

Aiden chuckled. "It's the last place anyone will look for you."

"I can't wait to meet the goats," I cracked up.

Traffic was on our side. In less than an hour, we pulled up in front of JFK airport. Once we arrived there, Aiden parked his bike and helped me off. With my growing bump, balance was quickly becoming a problem.

The whole airport and the streets around it bustled with life.

Every time I had traveled in the past it was by private plane. This time, I'd have to take a commercial flight. My first commercial flight ever, and I'd be doing it alone.

Well, not alone. I rubbed my belly. My baby would experience it too. Thank God, she was still inside me. Safely baking and protected from this mad world. But I feared loneliness.

I sniffled. "Do you think I'm being a coward?"

"No." There wasn't a shred of doubt in Aiden's voice. "I just want you to be happy." He wrapped his arms around me, and I buried my face in his chest. "This is not goodbye, little sister."

He handed me my passport. "It's a fake," he said in a low voice. "The moment you land in Europe, get rid of it. Then use this one," he handed me another passport, "-if you ever need to move outside the EU."

I quickly grabbed the spare passport, opened my bag, then unlocked the inside pocket with the cash and shoved it in there.

We rushed to enter the departure area and headed straight to the ticket counter. Using the pre-loaded debit card Aiden provided me, I bought a round trip ticket to Rome with no intention of ever returning. When Aiden flickered me a curious look, I shrugged. "It's cheaper."

Nervously, I slid the passport across the counter. My hand trembled, but I quickly lowered it and let it hang loosely down my body. The woman scanned the passport and my heart just about exploded when I heard the beep.

"Set," she announced, then glanced over her shoulder, issuing an order in Italian. I stood still, frozen and unable to process her words.

"Efficiency at its best. Thank you," Aiden chimed in, thanking her with a wide smile. The woman blushed crimson.

"My pleasure." Her tone dipped lower and suddenly, she was in all seduction mode.

Aiden's hand wrapped around my upper arm, he tugged me away and towards security.

"What was that?" he muttered under his breath.

I blinked in confusion. "Umm, I think she was flirting with you."

"Not that," he grumbled exasperated. "You freezing up. You can't be doing that."

I licked my lips. Suddenly I felt parched and paranoid. "I thought the passport didn't work," I whispered. "I panicked."

“It will work,” Aiden said with conviction.

Nerves twisted my stomach into knots. My hands shook. My heart raced. I hoped all this excitement wasn’t hurting the baby.

“Prenatal vitamins!” I exclaimed. “I forgot my prenatal vitamins.”

My memory has been horrific since I got pregnant. I couldn’t remember what I have or haven’t done lately. The look Aiden gave me said he questioned my sanity.

“What?” I protested, smiling sheepishly. “The baby needs to be taken care of.”

“Aren’t those really important only in the first trimester?”

I shook my head. “No, for the duration of pregnancy.”

“Get them from a doctor when you get there,” Aiden reasoned. “Unless you want to go back and just stay?”

Despite all his support, his tone was hopeful.

“I’ll get it there,” I said quickly. Staying wasn’t an option. Going through another engagement and another dead fiancé would destroy the remains of my reputation. “This is it, huh?”

Aiden pulled me into his embrace, squeezing me tightly.

“If you want to come back, I’ll come and get you,” he vowed. “Anytime. Anywhere.”

“Okay.” My voice was muffled against his chest.

“Promise me you’ll call if you’re in trouble or need me,” he demanded. When I didn’t comment, he pulled away and cupped my face. “Promise me, Sister.”

“I promise,” I choked out. “If I’m in trouble and I can’t handle it, I’ll call you.” He nodded, somewhat satisfied. But he still hadn’t let go of me. This was just as hard for him as it was for me. “It’s probably best if I go through security,” I continued softly, scared I’d break down and start sobbing.

I had never imagined life without my brothers. Without my family. The Callahan family was large and loud but it was mine. It felt like belonging. Until it didn’t.

All because I got pregnant.

And yet, I couldn’t find it in me to regret it.

That night in Las Vegas I went to that masquerade party with one single purpose. To lose my virginity. People thought me wild and promiscuous. I

was both, but not to the extent they assumed. The old fashioned part of me wanted to share that first experience with someone I loved.

Well, that choice was taken from me.

“Thank you so much.” I wrapped my arms around him again. “I love you. All of you.” I pulled back, my eyes burning from tears that threatened to spill. I ran a hand over my eyes. “Goodbye, Aiden.”

With a last look, I turned around and rushed towards security. I had to leave. I couldn’t have another dead man on my hands. I could and should offer a better life to my daughter. Not the death and shadows that seemed to hunt me everywhere I turned.

Once I was through security, I risked another peek over my shoulder. Aiden still stood there, watching me with a sad expression. He knew this was the best choice for me and my daughter, even though he wasn’t happy about it.

I raised my hand and waved. I even managed a smile, although my heart felt heavy and my throat tight.

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Chapter Fifteen

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MARGARET

The commercial flight to Italy was a disaster. I got the worst seat. The one by the bathroom, seated between two men who looked like they were part of a gang.

The irony would be laughable. Except that it wasn't.

I only left my seat once and ensured to bring my bag along. I didn't trust the two men not to go through my stuff. I barely got any sleep during the eight hour flight. Dozing off a handful of times, the rest was impossible. The constant shifting of men on either side of me had me waking up.

Once I was finally off the plane and passed through immigration, I slipped into the bathroom, all the while dreaming of finding a hotel. I couldn't wait to get a full night's sleep. It became my most important thing since I got pregnant. Sleep and food. Without it, I turned into a raging monster.

I slipped into the first restroom and locked myself in the handicap stall, not wanting to dig through my stash of money in the middle of the airport. I reached for the side pocket with the lock that Aiden installed for me and I froze.

It was empty.

No cash. No spare passport.

I opened the baby changing station and put my bag on there, then started digging through it.

"No, no, no." Panic rose through me. This couldn't be happening. I dug through the contents of my entire bag. "Oh my God," I cried softly. "Please no."

“Stai bene?” Someone asked. I had no fucking idea what it meant. I never bothered learning Italian. Nor any other language. I only spoke English and Irish. In my world, it seemed enough.

Ignoring the question, I kept digging through the bag, hoping against all odds that maybe the cash and spare passport were at the bottom of it.

A knock on the door.

“What?” I snapped.

A pause. “Are you okay?”

Shit. I barely landed and I was already snapping at people. I swallowed. This wasn’t good. I lost all the money, except for a few thousand that was in my wallet. The two guys who sat with me had to have taken it when I dozed off.

Fuck, why did I sleep?

“Yes,” I choked out. Fuck no, I wasn’t okay. Fifty grand was stolen. Oh my God!

How could I have been so stupid? My sixth sense was warning me, but I ignored it. In my entire life, I’d never let anyone play me just because I was a woman. I partied wild, but there were always people around me who ensured I was safe.

Now I had nobody. Nothing. And I was robbed blind.

The woman behind the door sighed as if she didn’t believe I was okay, but she said nothing else. I heard her soft steps distancing, leaving me alone to my despair.

I stared at my empty secret compartment and slowly, like a tide on the full moon, anger slowly bubbled and rose.

IT WAS dark when I arrived in the dark alley, the old stone homes closing in on me from three sides. This was definitely not Rome advertised in tourist brochures.

My sweatshirt was on, somewhat hiding my belly and the hoodie covering my head.

I walked down the cobble street until I found the house number that was provided as the men’s address. I had to charm the woman at the front desk of ITA Airways and convince her that my boyfriend left me at the airport

after we landed because we had an argument. I even rubbed my belly as a tear made its way down my cheek, telling her I suspected he was cheating on me and dragged me to the land of love to hook up with a woman he met on the internet.

The woman sighed and let out a few words in Italian, probably curses. But she ended up giving me the address, and it was how I found myself here. I blew out a frustrated breath. Teaching an asshole a lesson while six months pregnant wasn't exactly something I cared to have on my resume.

But here we were.

Silently, I walked towards the house. Glancing around, I couldn't spot a single soul around. I'd never thought that to be possible in Rome. I climbed up the stone stairs, careful not to step on cracked ones. Or unbalanced ones.

Once on the second story landing, I took a moment to ease the tension in my shoulders. I dug out the scissors I purchased earlier. My first purchase in the land of love and it was scissors. So I could threaten jerks who stole from me.

I shook my head in disbelief.

If this was an indication of my future here, I needed to find another EU country to live in.

Besides, Áine would get a kick out of it. I refused to fight with a knife and here I was gripping something like one as if my life depended on it. In some ways, it did.

Putting my hand on the nob, I twisted it and the door opened. I entered the shabby apartment, then lowered my Vera Bradley bag on the tiled floor. The old pipes clanked and the shower came on. Inwardly, I groaned. I'd have to teach the thieving asshole a lesson while he was naked. This day was getting better and better.

This actually might work out, I thought silently. It'd be hard to kill two men at the same time in my condition. The kitchen was empty. The living area was empty. The bedroom was empty.

"Okay, just one guy then," I whispered to myself while the shower kept running.

I made my way through the small apartment until I reached the bathroom with the door cracked open. My eyes darted around the small European bathroom. Just enough space for one person. Definitely not two, and one well into her second trimester.

I leaned against the door and waited. First he'd tell me where the money was and then I'd kill him. I was tired, hungry, and cranky as fuck. He picked the wrong woman to fuck with.

As I waited for what had to be the longest shower to end, I daydreamed about a warm, comfy bed and room service for one night at least, before I'd take the ferry to Sicily. I couldn't risk my family finding me and dragging me back to marry someone. No Northern Italy for me. Sicily sounded better and warmer.

The shower cut off, and I tensed up, ready and waiting for him to push the shower curtain aside. My hand gripped the knife just as he walked through with a towel around his waist.

He barely stepped out when he noticed me.

"Hey there. Remember me?" I deadpanned calmly. He should know never to fuck with a pregnant woman. Especially not an Irish pregnant woman.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" he shouted, his eyes wide and darting all around me.

"You have something of mine and I want it back," I said quietly. Eerily.

He paled, hanging on to his towel around his slightly obese waist like his life depended on it. I threw the scissors in the air and caught it by the handle. I was smugly pleased with the revelation that I was still good at this. His eyeballs bulged.

"Thought you were gonna get one over on a young pregnant woman traveling alone, didn't you?" I sneered, keeping my voice even and low. "Give me the cash and passport, and I actually might consider not killing you."

Taking my size and condition as my weakness, his hand flew through the air. But I was quicker. I sidestepped him, flicked the scissors open to use it as a switchblade and sliced his right forearm vertically down all the way to his wrist.

His scream pierced my ears. He tumbled down to his knees and his towel fell off. My stomach roiled and I thought I'd scream. I hadn't seen a man naked since that night in Vegas, but this was not how I wanted my dry spell to end.

"I don't have your money," he cried.

This time I sliced his other forearm. He watched me with a frantic disbelief.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

His blood dripped on the old tile, staining it crimson.

“Well, then we have a problem,” I commented with a dark smile. “Someone’s gotta pay me back.” I casually let my eyes roam around, feigning to look for anyone to pay that debt. “But there’s nobody here,” I remarked. “So I guess I’ll have to kill you.”

The last sentence triggered a full blown panic attack in the guy. I could see it in his dilated pupils. He reeked of fear. But desperation was stronger than his fear. He threw himself over the floor, reaching for the nearby drawer that was already open. His fingers wrapped around the gun, but I kicked him hard, knocking the gun from his hands and letting it fly through the air. I caught it. He lunged at me, trying to tackle me to the floor and I pulled the trigger, aiming at his gut. A bloodcurdling scream erupted through the air.

“Fuck,” I hissed. “You’re going to tell the whole goddamn city I’m here. I’m just going to slice your throat and end it.”

I threw the gun out of his reach and then pushed the scissors into his wound, piercing him, then twisted it inside his flesh.

“Wait, wait,” he choked out, pleading. “I have your passport and ten grand. Under my bed.”

I snorted. “Ten grand? Out of fifty. What happened to the other forty?”

Blood dripped, pooling around him. His whimpers and the terror in his eyes told me all I had to know.

He was speaking the truth. I was fucked.

But so was this fucker.

So in one swift move, I sliced his throat.

I calmly left the apartment and hailed a cab, letting it take me to a hotel right outside the city. I took their cheapest room and once inside, I took a shower, then ventured back out to buy a local cell phone. An hour later, I was back in the room. I used my old cell phone to type up a quick message.

Arrived safely. All good.

I clicked send. I didn’t want Aiden to worry. And he’d keep the twins from searching me out. Filling the tub with water, I dropped my iPhone in it and let it soak. Tomorrow, it’d be destroyed and untraceable.

Sighing heavily, I crawled inside the covers, closed my eyes, and let the dreams pull me under.

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Chapter Sixteen

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LUCA

The clock ticked.

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.

It was loud, seconds turning into minutes, then hours and lastly days.

I had to admit. Margaret running away surprised me. Of course, I'd been able to find her itinerary within twelve hours of her disappearance. I immediately lined up men and women to watch her from the moment she stepped off of that plane.

Hence, my unexpected visit to Italy.

My lips tugged up into a half-smile, reading the report of her hunting down a man who dared to steal from her. She certainly taught him a lesson.

My daughter would be in safe hands with her mother. But I'd always be a shadow watching over them.

I'd be heading for Sicily, as soon as I killed the second fucker who dared to steal from my woman.

My car turned into a warehouse lot outside Rome. I'd called in local help, meaning Nonno's men. We found the fucker and now, he was quote - safe and sound - end quote, in the trunk of this car.

When the car stopped, I opened the door and stepped out. Guido, one of Nonno's most trusted men, unlocked the trunk and yanked out the dude who looked like he'd been through a tornado. Crumpled, dirty clothes. Untrimmed hair. Bags under his eyes.

His eyes darted my way, glaring at me. "Do you know who I am?" he hissed.

“A nobody,” I drawled. “But you stole from somebody so let’s get to business. Shall we?”

His eyes darted between me and my men. “Marchetti won’t be happy to hear about this,” he growled.

I cocked my eyebrow, seemingly unfazed but an alert shot through me. Why was this asshole working for Marchetti?

I gave him a swift kick in the ribs.

“I didn’t know Marchetti lowered his standards and now steals from pregnant women,” I said coldly.

He wheezed, curling into a ball. If this was the quality of men Marchetti had surrounded himself with, I was surprised he was still alive.

“She’s not just any woman,” he grunted. “Marchetti wants her dead.”

I exchanged looks with the men. Margaret couldn’t have possibly done something to draw the attention of one of the most dangerous men in the world. Could she?

Guido grabbed his arm and hauled him to his feet. “Explain,” I demanded.

One thing I learned from Nonno was you never needed Marchetti’s attention on you. The question was what would have happened for Marchetti to be interested in Margaret.

“She violated the agreement,” he spat.

A bad feeling pooled in the pit of my stomach. Past ghosts were catching up. But then I kind of knew they eventually would, didn’t I?

“What. Agreement?” I gritted.

“Marchetti is not to step foot in Ireland and no Callahan can step foot in Italy.”

I snatched his hair and tilted his face up to meet mine. The truth was written on his face. In his eyes. Fuck!

Couldn’t anything be easy?

THE IRON GATES SLID OPEN, revealing a long driveway lined with trees and a white marble palace at the end of it.

You’d think a king lived here, but no, it was only one of the most powerful men in the world.

Untouchable.

That was what my father called him for as long as I could remember.

The large estate stood behind acres and acres of land, which Marchetti owned too, on the outskirts of Rome. He preferred to stay here most of the time, although he had just as much of an extravagant home in the city. And many other places throughout the world.

“So you found your *donna*.” My woman. Yeah, that sounded right. Margaret Callahan was mine. If only she’d stop contradicting me at every goddamn turn.

I turned to Nonno who sat beside me in the car. “Yes, she’s the one,” I said without an ounce of doubt. She had been the one since she was that five-year-old girl I was willing to fight my father for, and die for.

Nonno’s eyes flicked to the large estate, then back to me.

“I’m happy to hear that, *nipote*,” he replied. He might call Cassio and me his grandsons, but truthfully, we were his sons. The ones he never had. And he raised us as such. “I’ve been waiting a long time to see you and Cassio settled.”

It was true. He’d been saying for years he refused to leave this Earth until Cassio and I started our own families. He worried too much about us. Even with the families we’d formed with our friends, he wanted to see us settled. Luciano was the first of the men to get married, but it also spurred Nonno to remind us more often that it was time for us to get settled too.

“When can I expect my youngest grandson’s wedding?” he demanded to know, knocking his cane against the floor of the car. Then he leaned against it and cleared his throat. “I need to see you wed, my child, so I can finally rest. Your mamma and Nonna are waiting for me.”

My chest tightened. I didn’t like to think about Nonno dying. He’d been the only parent Cassio and I had ever known. Our father was just a cruel bastard. He couldn’t be considered anything else. He might have not sliced our mother’s wrists, but he pushed her into it.

“She doesn’t want me,” I said. A sardonic feeling pulled in my chest. It was the first time I uttered those words out loud. “Yet,” I added.

Failing wasn’t an option. She and our unborn child were the reason I was here, ready to make a deal with Marchetti. I’d do anything to save her life. Our child’s life.

The car came to a stop. One last shared look and Nonno’s nod.

The moment Nonno and I exited the car, four men came behind us and two men stood in front of us. Guido had Nonno's back. I didn't need bodyguards, although at this moment, I wished I had some reinforcements.

We were escorted through the large marble foyer and into the office where Marchetti, aged forty-five leaned back in his chair, ruling his kingdom. There weren't many people who had seen Enrico Marchetti up close. Probably better for the female population, because even his rare photographs in the paper had women going wild.

Of course, he didn't compare to me.

"Signore DiMauro," he greeted Nonno first.

"Enrico, thank you for seeing me and my nipote." My grandfather tired quicker these days, so I helped him into the first empty chair.

"Of course. You and my father were close," Enrico retorted. "Caffè? Cappuccino?"

It was the one thing I didn't miss about Italy. The only thing. Their constant need to drink a goddamn coffee.

Nonno's eyes traveled over the room, memories practically dancing in his eyes.

"I remember days when your father and I spent many hours in this office," Nonno remarked.

Enrico's lips barely tipped up. "I remember those days too."

Nonno chuckled. "You wanted to jump right into the business but your father wanted to give you time to burn some energy out."

I had to stop myself from rolling my eyes.

"Let's get straight to business," I interrupted their reminiscing. "We are here to discuss Margaret Callahan."

Enrico gave me a hard look. Nonno wasn't far behind him.

"Living in America has made you too rash," Enrico remarked dryly.

I sat back in his office chair. "Well, when it's a matter of life and death, I like to speed things along and leave the caffè for some other time."

Enrico ran a thumb across his jaw. "Do pray tell. What's the urgency then?"

"You have a hit on Margaret Callahan," I said coldly.

His eyebrow cocked. If there was one man who rivaled my arrogance, it was this man.

"And that is your concern how?" he said dryly.

“I’m going to marry her.” *She just doesn’t know it yet.* But he didn’t need to know that.

“Of all the women in this world, you settle for Callahan’s niece,” he noted wryly. “Why am I not surprised?”

Because he was a sharp motherfucker, but he didn’t need more boosting. His ego might just explode.

“Why did your men attack her?” I asked instead.

His jaw tightened. “Those weren’t my men,” he said darkly. “I got an alert that a Callahan family member would attempt to enter Italy.” I clenched my teeth. This fucker had Callahans on the radar. Probably for as long as my father set up the murder of Margaret’s father to fall on Marchetti’s. “The instructions were to keep close watch. They went too far.”

“So you don’t want her dead?” Nonno inquired.

A sardonic breath left her. “I wouldn’t kill a woman but a promise is a promise. No Callahan family members in this country.” His expression darkened. “They killed my twin brother.”

That much was true. But they killed him in retribution for something that the Marchetti family didn’t do.

“She won’t be a Callahan much longer,” I said, keeping my composure. It took all my self-restraint not to shoot the fucker. His answer was too conflicting. It was better to be safe than sorry. Shoot now, ask questions later. Except, this fucking guy was too powerful to fuck with.

“Why is the girl traveling with a fake passport?” he asked instead, watching me carefully. The guy could sniff out a lie from miles away.

“She refused her family’s line up of marital prospects.” My voice was dark. Just the thought of her marrying anyone else was enough to have me seeing red.

“So she refused to marry, but she’ll marry you?” he inquired curiously. “Or is it that the last four men she was lined up to marry died under mysterious circumstances that has Margaret Callahan gun shy?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Nobody but Margaret Callahan and I will be raising our daughter.”

Surprise flashed in his eyes. “Your daughter?” He rocked back in his chair. “So you knocked her up, huh?”

I clenched my teeth so hard, my jaw bones cracked.

“Maybe a proposition,” Nonno chimed in. “A peace offering. An alliance between us.”

“As far as I know, Signore DiMauro, your family and ours already have an alliance,” Enrico remarked.

I knew where this was going before Nonno uttered the next words. “But this would include the Callahan bloodline too. A marriage alliance. Between Luca’s daughter and your son.”

This was the part I didn’t like. Giving my daughter to any fucker. Didn’t Nonno realize my baby girl would be a nun? Okay, maybe that was slightly overboard, but I certainly didn’t want my daughter connected to the most ruthless family in Italy.

Besides, every single woman that married the head of the Marchetti family for the past few generations was murdered. Including Enrico’s wife.

That was definitely not the path for my baby girl.

“I want your word that my wife and her family are safe in Italy,” I insisted.

He watched me, silence stretching. “Concordato.” Agreed. “But it only extends to her brothers. If her uncle steps foot here, he’ll be a dead man.”

An hour later, Nonno and I were in the car, leaving the Marchetti estate.

“Thank you, Nonno.”

“Prima la famiglia.” Family first. He knew what was at stake here. If Marchetti learned that it was me who killed Callahan, Margaret’s father, and went along with my father to set Enrico up, we’d be on the chopping block. With each year we’d kept the secret alive and refused to come clean, we’d become the guilty party. It cost Enrico his twin brother.

We couldn’t go back and change the course of what happened. So we had to leave with the secrets and consequences.

The main thing for now was that Margaret would be safe in Italy.

Now there was only one obstacle left. Convincing the stubborn Irish beauty that I was her best option.

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Chapter Seventeen

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MARGARET

Two weeks later, I roamed the city of Palermo in Sicily.

Alone.

No job. Funds that were quickly diminishing. Despair that was quickly growing.

I've walked aimlessly through the streets. The sky was darkening and the streets were quiet. It was the opposite of the constant buzz of the city.

I continued walking aimlessly down the centuries old streets. The cobbled alleyways led me to the beach where I lowered myself down and turned my attention to the paper gripped between my fingers.

For a moment, I stopped and considered going back to the little room I rented above Paolo's tavern but then decided against it. I needed more fresh air. Sitting in that room would drive me insane.

Paolo and his wife ran a little local tavern. Quite a popular one too. Every night traditional old Italian songs drifted through the air as the smell of Italian cooking and the sound of Italian words traveled through the air and into my room. I had yet to sit in the tavern for any of my meals. I mainly kept to myself, searching the newspaper ads for any job opportunities.

But with those it was always the same. Do you speak the language? Who do you know? What can you do?

I found myself at the little beach and struggled to lower myself onto my ass. The sand was still warm from the sun.

Uncrumpling the paper, I stared at yet another application. By now, I could even read it in Italian. It was always the same questions. Past

experience. Where; when; how long. But the most important question seemed to be your reference. It seemed to be all about who you know here.

Well, I knew nobody.

The sea breeze swept through, cooling the skin on my face. The scent of salt drifted through the air and seeped into my lungs. The view of white sand stretched for miles. It was a beautiful city. A beautiful island.

I could see myself raising my kid here if only I could find a job.

I wanted to make my own money, not depend on my brothers or family. Besides, nobody knew where I was. My brother believed me to be in northern Italy. Instead, I opted for southern Italy. I'd like to keep it that way.

My eyes traveled over the printed letters of the application as I rubbed my growing belly.

"Why can't they ask whether I know how to fight?" I grumbled under my breath with my eyes on my stomach, as if I was talking to my daughter. "Defend myself? Kill? That should be more important, don't you think so?"

Waves crashed against the shore. The sun was high up in the sky. I waited for an answer. Instead a soft chuckle sounded behind me.

"I think so," a voice behind me agreed.

I glanced over my shoulder to find an older man standing behind me. He wore a wide-brimmed straw hat that kept his eyes somewhat hidden and an old-time suit with suspenders. Like in *The Godfather*.

"Can you fight?" he questioned in broken English, a smile on his lips. The tone of his skin was olive despite his old age. His eyes were sharp and on me. It was then I noticed two men standing back.

His guards, I realized. They both had guns hanging from their shoulders. One of them dug in his pocket for a pack of cigarettes, then lit one up.

The old man was still watching me, waiting for an answer.

I rubbed my belly. "Maybe once upon a time, but not now," I said. "It's not good for the baby."

He went to lower himself but before I could even move, one of his guards assisted, then respectfully nodded and stepped away.

"Are you a president here?" I asked jokingly.

His laughter filled the air, the breeze carrying it on its wings. It made me smile, despite the bullshit I endured over the last two weeks. I wondered if that sound would travel across the seas and make another soul smile.

“No, not a president,” he answered, meeting my gaze. He had dark brown eyes full of knowledge and pain. This man knew of loss. I didn’t know how I knew it but I’d bet my life on it. His gaze flickered to the paper in my hands, then to me. “Looking for a job?”

I sighed. “Yes.”

“Where are you from?”

“The States.”

“No jobs back home?”

My eyes lowered to my stomach. “Not for me,” I answered.

He lifted his face towards the sky, a pensive expression coloring it.

“Maybe I can help you, Margaret,” he said, my name uttered slowly. My head whipped his way, eyeing him suspiciously. Before I could ask him how he knew my name, he continued. “I know everything that happens on my island, bella ragazza.”

My brows furrowed.

Luca King was the only man who ever called me *bella* before.

“What’s your name?” I asked suspiciously.

“Pascale DiMauro.”

The name sounded vaguely familiar. I searched my memory. The Irish mafia kept away from the Italian criminal organization, but I could have sworn DiMauro was one of the families that ran the Sicilian mafia.

I shook my head. Surely it couldn’t be the very same DiMauro family.

I must have uttered the words out loud because he nodded. “It’s exactly the same family.”

Well, shit.

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Chapter Eighteen

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MARGARET

It was a small world.

Never in a million years had I thought I'd find myself face-to-face with Luca King's grandfather. The stories of the Sicilian mafia families were notorious, although I didn't know much about Pascale DiMauro.

And here I was.

"Don't worry, bella," he assured, smiling. "You have nothing to fear."

"Famous last words," I muttered. Next thing you knew, I'd find myself in some dark ditch, on the side of the road. He kept watching me, making me more uncomfortable by the minute until I couldn't hold back my words. "I hate everything Benito King."

Jesus, maybe my goal was to get killed. "Me too."

My brows furrowed at that reply. "But your daughter and he–"

The pain that crossed his expression had me pausing. "My daughter was a good woman. Very delicate. Too delicate for this world. But I hoped she'd find a worthy man to nurture her. Benito was a cold-hearted bastard and he wanted a cold-hearted woman. Benito King murdered the vital part of my daughter even before she took her own life."

My heart clenched at the pain in his voice and without thinking, I reached out for his wrinkled hand and squeezed it gently.

"I'm so sorry," I croaked, feeling compassion for this old man. He was no longer the head of the DiMauro mafia. He was a grieving father. "I know how much it hurts to lose the ones we love."

I knew it firsthand. He must have read it in my eyes because he nodded.

“My daughter loved her sons more than anything in the world,” he barreled. “If only she’d have taken them and brought them here, I’d have gone to war for her. But she didn’t. It broke my heart to hear the news. It hurt my grandsons, too. They were left to their father’s cruelty.”

It was that part that I struggled with. When I looked at Cassio and Luca King, I didn’t see grieving sons. I didn’t see anything but their father.

As if he read my mind, he continued. “My grandsons are mine.” He pounded his chest, his strength frail. He must have been a force to reckon with once upon a time. “They are DiMauro. Their last name might be King, but the blood in their veins is DiMauro. They are their mother’s sons.”

Maybe Pascale DiMauro was right. Maybe I was too wrapped up into the King brothers’ physical similarities to see the other differences from their father.

“You never worried about them becoming like him?” I questioned in a tentative voice. “Like Benito?”

Mr. DiMauro shook his head passionately. “Mai,” he answered with firm conviction. “Never. They have my daughter in them. Luca more than Cassio. My little Luca has a soft heart underneath all that charm.” I scoffed softly but didn’t correct him. “He does, Margaret. Luca suffered the most from his father’s cruelty. His father tried to beat it out of him, but he failed. You know why?” he asked and I shook my head. It never even occurred to me to ask him why he’d tell me all this. “Because he is stubborn like his mother. It was her stubborn pride that stopped her from seeking help from me.”

Luca and Cassio King had their own ghosts and crosses to bear. I had just met this man, but I believed him. For whatever reason, I believed him.

For the next ten minutes we sat in silence, watching the beautiful blue sea shimmer with sunlight and crash softly against the shoreline.

He broke the silence. “So you want a job, Margaret Callahan?”

I tilted my head his way, watching the wrinkles on his face.

“What do you want in return?” I asked suspiciously.

He chuckled. “Your safety, bella mia.”

I studied him. He kind of reminded me of Da. My father could be ruthless but he was also protective and fair. The best father anyone could wish for.

“I’ll be grateful for anything,” I answered with a smile. “Anything decent,” I added quickly.

“Then help me to my feet, bella, and let’s go get you a decent job,” he retorted amused.

IT TOOK us a while to get back to the tavern.

We both walked slowly and wobbled, for different reasons, but we made it back.

Once we entered the establishment, it became clear that Pascale was very well known. He was greeted with respect and unlike what I had always seen in movies, people actually liked him. As if he was their protector.

Pictures of old Sicily hung on the walls. The round tables were covered in black and white checkered tablecloths. The sound of old Italian songs drifted through the air, along with the scent of good old-fashioned Italian cooking.

My stomach promptly growled and I groaned. At this rate, I’d be as big as a house when it was time to give birth.

“This baby had to be Italian,” I grumbled under my breath. “She always wants to eat.”

Mr. DiMauro chuckled.

“That’s not such a bad thing,” he mused. “We, Italians, can eat and drink.”

I grinned, looking at him amused. “We Irish can certainly drink.”

“Signore DiMauro,” the owner of the tavern greeted.

“Buon giorno, Paolo.” Mr. DiMauro’s eyes turned my way. “This is Miss Margaret, my new friend. Can we have a table, *per favore*?” Please. The man was charming and used manners.

Paolo’s eyes lit up and he immediately ushered us to his best table.

He seated us, speaking in a rushed Italian as he snapped his fingers at a waitress to hurry up and bring us drinks.

She showed up with two glasses and wine. I glanced at my large belly, that obviously screamed pregnancy, then her.

“Umm, maybe juice for me? Or just water, please,” I asked, giving her an apologetic smile.

The woman gave me a blank look and Mr. DiMauro must have repeated it in Italian because she turned on her heel and went to fetch a non-alcoholic

beverage. At least, I hoped.

"Sit down, Paolo," Mr. DiMauro said. "I have a proposition for you."

Ten minutes later, I had a job and my room was rented to me. Indefinitely.

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Chapter Nineteen

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LUCA

I sat back in the chair of Nonno's office.

Tree lines of lemon and orange groves stretched as far as I could see. The scent of citrus, fresh air drifting from the mountains in the back and sea in the front. Usually I felt at peace here, but since that ebony-haired stubborn Irish woman had left the States, with my little bun in her oven, I had to control the urge to just kidnap her and lock her up.

Except, after years of watching Margaret, I knew that would push her in the opposite direction of where I needed her. And frankly, I wanted her to be willing. I wanted her to choose me. Like that night in Vegas. Besides, something about forcing her and seeing her unhappy left my insides twisting.

Damn woman.

I never had this problem with women until her. I didn't quite know how to handle that, to be honest.

Maybe I needed to court her. Seduce her. Do all the idiotic romantic stuff that men usually did to get into a woman's pants. Except, we kind of threw that whole scenario out by the fact that I'd already gotten her pregnant. And she didn't even know that I was the father. No amount of romance was going to keep her from trying to kill me when she found out that little fact. I wanted our daughter born and happy with both of us there, which meant I had to figure out a way not to be her murder victim.

One way or another, Margaret and our child would be mine.

Nonno always said that without a woman to share your happiness and sorrows with, all sacrifices would be for naught. He had Nonna. Mamma

didn’t have that but she craved it. She grew up around it. It was probably the reason she always loved to watch Disney movies.

It was about the only thing I remembered of her - that and her void, dark eyes as red water swallowed her body. Cassio talked about her a lot. So did Nonno. It kept the memory of her alive in my mind, but somehow I could never shake off the feeling that she left me.

She left this world by killing herself. Cassio and I were not enough to keep her with us. My big brother blamed Father. I blamed him too, but the feeling remained.

The day I dared to stab my father flitted to the forefront of my mind. After Cassio found out about what I had done and the beating I had gotten, he came home straight away to ensure I was alright.

Huddled in the corner of my room, I trembled with anxiety and pain. Tears burned the backs of my eyes, but I held them back. I had to. If Father saw them, he’d give me another beating.

A dark shadow came forward and my eyes shot up to the door.

“Cassio,” I whimpered, clutching my side.

It even hurt to talk. His eyes traveled over me, turning darker than I’d ever seen them.

He rushed toward me and kneeled down. “Fuck,” he muttered. “You look like shit.”

“But better than you,” I rasped.

My hands shook from the force of the pain.

Cassio frowned. “I’m not sure if you’re delirious or just drugged up, but I’m better looking than you.”

A choked laugh escaped me, causing more sharp pain and I coughed, blood trickling down my chin.

His fingers pressed against my ribs and I winced. “Goddamn it, your ribs are broken. What happened for Father to beat you to within an inch of your life?”

I coughed more blood out.

“I stabbed him,” I admitted. Cassio’s eyes filled with incredulous rage. ”He was hurting a little girl,” I added.

“Luca, you can’t react,” he muttered. “You have to think before you do something. Until you’re old enough and strong enough that Father cannot hurt you.”

“Like he hurt Mamma?” I asked.

“Yes.” I watched him, nausea growing in my belly. “He had beaten the strength and spirit out of her. If you stay here, he’ll do the same to you.”

I didn’t know where he wanted me to go. No matter where I hid in this city, my father would find me.

He sat silently next to me, examining my wounds and covering them with bandages my father’s cook was able to sneak me.

“I’m taking you with me,” he finally concluded. “I have met some friends at college. They’ll help me take you to Nonno.”

Nonno always said I had Mamma’s spirit and stubbornness. He was convinced that deep down I was as gentle as Mamma. He was wrong. I was as rotten as my father.

Nonno’s voice reached from the terrace. The weather here was still beautiful in October, the large French doors wide open and leading to Nonno’s favorite garden. Yes, it was the beginning of October, but I knew it’d stay like this for a while.

“Do you have a plan for your woman?” Nonno asked, watching me.

“She won’t be happy,” I told him. “She doesn’t want me.” I winced. It sounded like self-pity, goddamn it.

Unwanted seemed to be an ongoing theme with me. Father didn’t want me. Mother wouldn’t live for me. And how fucking appropriate that Margaret didn’t want me.

“Then you make her want you,” Nonno declared like that solved it all. “You’re a king. A DiMauro descendant and as such you need a queen by your side. Is Margaret Callahan that queen?”

She certainly was, and so much more. She was exactly the type of queen a man needed at his side. The kind that would be ruthless and protective of the ones she loved. Of our daughter.

“She is, Nonno,” I answered.

Her loyalty to her brothers and family rivaled Nonno’s. No wonder he fell under her spell. He secured her a job at the local tavern and visited her every day, despite the owner's complaints that she was the worst barmaid he’d ever had. But he’d never disobey my Nonno so she still had a job.

Nonno grinned with a self-satisfied, knowing smirk. “Then she will be your wife.”

I waved my hand, then stood up. “Sit down, Nonno.”

“Boy, I can stand all day,” he protested.

“I know,” I agreed. “But make me happy and sit with me.”

Helping him to the wide couch, we both sat down and I stretched my legs out.

“She’s going to make a good mother for your child,” Nonno remarked. I nodded. It didn’t surprise me that he knew. The old man knew everything.

Silence filled the space between us. Nonno’s eyes were heavy. He was tired. He’d been claiming for years that he’d refused to die before seeing both his grandchildren settled. I believed him. But he was tired. He wanted to join Nonna and Mamma in the afterworld, or wherever we went afterwards.

“Will you be good to her, grandson?” he demanded to know.

“I will.”

God help me but I’d never be Benito. One way or the other, we’d find common ground and raise our daughter together.

Ironic really.

I’d had plenty of women. *The wrong kind*, Nonno always said. I always laughed it off. Marriage was never a consideration. Children even less so.

Until it became all I could think about. It was game over the moment I had her. Checkmate and all that crap.

But only with Margaret. It was her strength that appealed to me. Her loyalty. And her goddamn wit.

“What’s your plan?” Nonno asked.

“I’m going to become her friend first,” I declared. “Before I steal her heart.”

Margaret Callahan ruined me that night in Vegas. I might have taken her virginity, but she had taken a lot more from me.

She had stolen my heart. Or maybe it was that little girl all those years ago who stole my heart. The little girl that my father almost killed. She was the first person I went against my father for.

Now, I’m going to woo her for her heart. And losing wasn’t an option.

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Chapter Twenty

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MARGARET

I stared up at the white ceiling of my little room above the tavern.

It has been weeks since I arrived in Sicily. Weeks since I spoke to my brothers. Or my cousin. I missed my family. It was the first time since I was born that I was truly alone.

Some mornings I'd wake up and think I was still home. I'd even found myself longing for it. Not for my mother. Or the idiotic arrangements she and Uncle kept trying to make for me. I longed to talk to people that I knew cared for me and that I cared for.

Another hour and I'd have to make my way downstairs. I fucking sucked at my job. Day after day I'd waited for the owner to fire me. He hadn't and I suspected it had something to do with the sweet old man who ran the Sicilian mafia.

So typical. I escaped the world of the New York Irish mafia only to get in the heart of the Sicilian mafia. A helping hand had been extended by the most unlikely man. I hoped that hand didn't end up smacking me in the head.

I hadn't made any friends here. Signore DiMauro was the only man willing to talk to me in this place. Women steered clear of me. Children too.

My eyes darted to my cell phone on the nightstand. It wasn't as if anyone would call me. Nobody knew that number. But my fingers practically itched to dial one of my brothers' cell numbers.

"We can't call them, Luna," I murmured softly, rubbing my belly. I'd been going through a list of names for the past month trying to settle for the one I liked the best. I was currently on the twenty-third name. "They'll want

to come and save us. Then I'll have to marry someone. Although they'll probably be dead before we step foot in a church."

A soft kick and I smiled. My little girl understood me. She has been the only thing to keep me going. Keeping me sane.

I had to get my shit together. I had less than two months before the baby was due and I was nowhere near ready. All I had was diapers. The money I was able to get back from the scumbag who stole from me was long gone.

Ten thousand should have lasted me longer. I bought cute maternity clothes, went to see a local Ob/Gyn and bought prenatal vitamins, and paid for my room. It was that easy to go through ten grand.

I should have done better managing the money. Unfortunately, controlling my spending was never something I had to worry about, so I spent it unreasonably. And too fast. It made me realize how spoiled I was growing up. I never wanted or needed anything.

"Well, dwelling on all that won't do us any good. Will it, Bella?" I murmured, rubbing my belly and shifting out of the bed. Jesus, I was all over the place with the names. I really had to nail it down. I hoped one name would strike me and I'd know right away it was the right name.

"No, not Bella," I grumbled, my thoughts immediately shifting to Luca King.

I shook my head and headed into the bathroom. Taking a quick shower, I got dressed and wobbled slowly down the stairs.

"Ah, donna mia," the owner exclaimed exasperatedly. I swore the old guy cringed every time he saw me. He probably hid all his good dishware.

If he had any left, I thought wryly to myself.

Some old Italian music played in the background. The tavern smelled like homemade wine. Gross. And the chatter of people in Italian had my head buzzing. I'd catch every tenth word.

"Hello, Paolo," I greeted him, forcing a smile. I wasn't exactly thrilled with this job, but it was the only one that anyone on the island would give me.

Thanks to Mr. DiMauro for putting in a word.

So here I was, acting like a civilized and temperamental Irish wench. *Literally.* A damn wench in a tavern that looked like it dated back to World War I.

Paolo muttered some Italian words, rolled his eyes, and handed me an apron.

“Go clean tables.” His thick accent made the word sound like *tableau*. “Do not touch.” The apron pushed into my hands, he emphasized. “Anything.”

I shook my head. God, I had fallen. From killing men and fighting human trafficking to this. *This!* Being told not to touch anything. It was like being a two-year-old kid all over again.

Putting the apron on, it barely covered my belly, I took a rag and started cleaning tables. One, then the other. Lost in my thoughts, I moved on to the next table when my butt bumped into the occupied table and rattled it off its skinny table legs.

With horror I watched as the plates smashed against the rustic tiled floor, the entire scene playing out in slow motion.

A string of temperamental words left Paolo’s lips. His hands waved up and down, and I was fairly certain he was firing me. Maybe wishing me off this island.

Pronto! I learned that word fairly quickly. It meant quickly. Paolo and all his guests always wanted everything *pronto*.

“Ah, fuck,” I grumbled, my hand immediately on my belly rubbing it gently. “We fucked up, Alice.”

Paolo was still cursing me to the moon and back probably but I tuned him out, holding my back and readying to lower myself down.

“Alice?” An amused, deep voice came from my left side. A familiar voice. Then a hand wrapped around my forearm. “Don’t even think about getting down to clean that up.”

It couldn’t be. My mind had finally gone. I was imagining things. My brain had found a twisted corner where a man I disliked waited for me.

Slowly, I shifted my head to find none other than Luca King standing next to me. I blinked, then blinked again.

I groaned. “Of all the people in the world… Why you?”

His mouth twisted into that well-known smirk. The one I could live without seeing again for the rest of my days.

Embarrassment warmed my cheeks, but I refused to show it.

“Fancy seeing you here, Margaret Callahan,” he drawled, his eyes shining with amusement. He didn’t seem surprised to see me at all. His gaze met mine, sparked with something warm and dangerously tempting.

My loneliness is working against me, I told myself.

“So not fancy seeing you here, Luca King,” I answered, exhausted, and my shift had barely started. My back was killing me and a feeling deep inside my chest pulled heavy against my heart.

Paolo was already approaching us, speaking in rushed Italian. Luca didn’t seem fazed and replied in a hard tone, which caused another string of rushed Italian words from Paolo. My eyes darted between my boss and Luca. It didn’t take a translator to know that Luca would get his way.

It was in the sure way he carried himself, but even more so in the way he watched Paolo. Like the latter worked for him. Luca said something in a low, final tone and surprise flickered in Paolo’s gaze that flickered my way.

“Va bene,” Paolo caved just as I suspected.

A terse nod and Luca dismissed him, turning his back to him.

“Come sit down with me, Margaret,” he murmured softly. He took my hand and gently urged me forward. “Please.”

Hesitancy slithered down my spine. Luca was never gentle. Something was up. But I let him lead me to the table, and the moment I lowered down onto the seat, a sigh left me.

Luca took the seat beside me, his eyes boring into me.

“What, Luca?” I grumbled. God, my shift just started and my feet were killing me.

“You shouldn’t be doing physical labor in your condition,” he reprimanded.

I rolled my shoulders, then let out an annoyed breath. “You realize women have been doing physical labor waiting on their husbands for centuries, right? This is no different.”

He didn’t like my response, but he didn’t contradict me. Maybe he was smart after all.

“What are you doing here?” I demanded to know.

He shrugged his shoulders and leaned back in his seat.

“Visiting my grandfather.”

“You visit him often?”

“Not often enough.”

Pascale DiMauro appeared at our table, wearing his usual. A wide-brimmed hat and the old fashioned suit with suspenders. Despite his frail state, he stood tall and proud, his gaze sharp.

“Margaret, I see you met my nipote,” he greeted me with a smug smirk that reminded me so much of the man sitting next to me. *Grandson*. Luca

King was Pascale DiMauro's grandson and by the single look Luca gave his father, I could tell he cared a lot about him.

Penelope DiMauro was Benito King's mistress and daughter of the head of the Sicilian mafia, Pascale DiMauro. The rumor on the street was that Benito had eyes on her and Italy when he seduced her. So maybe these men experienced tragedy caused by Benito King just like me.

"I did. Luca and I go way back," I grumbled softly. "Somehow, it doesn't surprise me to see him here. It seems he's always everywhere. My constant shadow." I shook my head in light annoyance. "If only you were there when I was knocked up, I might not be in this predicament."

Something flickered in Luca's gaze. Dark. Possessive. Unsettling.

Butterflies fluttered in my stomach. Weird things crackled in my chest and sparked, like a firecracker on the 4th of July. I pulled my eyes away from Luca and into a safety zone. The head of the Sicilian mafia.

"Can I join you two young people?" Pascale asked.

I immediately nodded my head. "Yes, yes. Of course, Mr. DiMauro." It wasn't as if I'd tell the head of the Sicilian mafia bugger off. He clicked his tongue. "No, no, no. You call me *Nonno*."

Huh? I looked at Luca and then at his grandfather. They both seemed awfully smug, smiling like two boys ready to stir a pot.

Luca stood up and helped lower his grandfather into the chair.

He smiled, taking my hand and squeezing it. "You still happy with Sicily?" I nodded. "And how is your job? Any new mishaps since last time I saw you?" he continued.

I looked back to Paolo who watched us all from his spot behind the bar.

"Every day in this tavern is a mishap," I muttered under my breath.

Pascale chuckled. "Was Paolo too hard on you?"

I smiled sheepishly. "No. I'm afraid I'm a horrible waitress."

Luca watched us, studying me like he wanted to figure me out while Pascale made a dismissive motion with his hand, his eyes shining with amusement. We had gotten acquainted over the last few weeks. He'd find his way to Paolo's tavern and talk to me quite often.

"You are perfect," Pascale said. "But better at killing people. No?" I exploded with laughter.

Of course, he'd remember what I said the first time we met.

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Chapter Twenty-One

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LUCA

She had changed.

It had nothing to do with the stage of her pregnancy.

It had only been a month since she left the States, but the changes were evident. At least to me they were.

There was a quiet humility to her that wasn't there before.

Margaret and Nonno were talking about a beach that was nearby.

"Have you found yourself a nice Sicilian boy, Margaret?" Nonno asked. The old man was sly. It was the reason I didn't mind accepting his help. He'd play a distressed grandfather and open the door for my plan of attack.

Margaret chuckled uncomfortably. "I'm afraid not," she answered.

"Have you looked?" Nonno was determined when he wanted information.

She rolled her eyes, her blues sparkling like sapphires under the sun. "Paolo has kept me busy." She lowered her eyes to her belly and rubbed her stomach. "And this little one wants me to sleep extra hours."

Grandfather grinned. "Ah yes. I remember those days. My wife was always hungry and sleepy when she was pregnant. Especially with Penelope."

Margaret's eyes flickered to him, pensively. "Penelope," she murmured softly. Her eyes flicked my way. "Your mom."

Nonno nodded. "Yes, Luca and Cassio's mother."

Margaret's palm soothed her belly. Up and down. Up and down. "Penelope," she murmured softly, as if she was tasting the name on her lips. She lowered her eyes to her stomach. "What do you think, Poppy?" She

waited a bit as if she expected an answer. Heck, maybe she waited for two kicks for yes and one for no. Then as if she remembered she wasn't alone, she met my grandfather's gaze. "That's a very pretty name."

A shadow passed my grandfather's face. "My wife picked it. It means one who is wise and our Penelope was wise. Except when she–"

He trailed off and I knew exactly what he meant to say. My mamma was wise until the day she got involved with Benito King. He had broken her. Destroyed her soft heart until she felt her only way out was by committing suicide.

It just about killed Nonno to learn his only daughter had ended her own life. It was his stubbornness and determination to ensure his legacy, our mother's legacy, carried him on.

Margaret must have sensed Nonno's grief. She reached out and patted his hand gently. Nonno covered her hand with his frail one.

"I want to join them," he murmured softly. "My wife and my daughter." Nonno's eyes came to mine. "But this one is holding me back."

Margaret's crystal blue eyes came my way then returned to Nonno. "What do you mean?"

"I refuse to die before my last grandson is married." He lifted his face towards the ceiling, as if he expected to see the sky. He was playing his part well. Although he was telling the truth. The pain of losing Nonna and then my mother hit him hard. He often said he carried on to ensure Cassio and I lived into our adulthood, married off and with our own families.

Margaret's eyes glimmered and she squeezed his hand. "I'm sure Luca will find someone." She turned her face to me. "Right?"

I didn't confirm. I didn't deny.

"Ah, my *nipote* wants a fairytale," Nonno declared.

Margaret chuckled, looking at me with curiosity. "Do you really?" she teased. "I didn't take you for a romantic kind of guy."

Silence followed. My grandfather twisted his cane against the ground.

"Luca was young when he lost his mother," Nonno started softly. "But he remembers my Penelope. He remembers the sorrow of losing her. He remembers her tales of *fiabe*." Fairy tales. "My grandsons might carry the King name, but they are mine. My blood."

I glanced at Margaret's dress. She looked beautiful. Like a pregnant Roman goddess. The color of her dress was light blue, almost the same shade as her eyes. Blue was her color although she rarely wore it.

Nonno switched subjects to a more neutral one. For the next half an hour Margaret and he discussed gardening tips, the best kind of dirt to use, and the perfect sun. It had been a while since I'd seen Nonno so happy and smiling. Cassio and Áine got married in City Hall and while Nonno was happy for them, he felt robbed because he wasn't present to see it. They had a wedding ceremony in Sicily for Nonno's sake but it wasn't the same and Margaret never showed for that one.

My eyes scanned the tavern while Nonno and Margaret talked.

Nonno stood up and his men approached, sticking close to him.

"I shall see you again, beautiful Margaret," Nonno said his goodbyes. Both of us watched him walk slowly out of the tavern, then Margaret's attention came back to me.

"He's a darling," she said. "I never had a grandfather but I always imagined him like that." Then she tilted her head and added, "Minus the head of the mafia."

"Don't hold that against me," I said. Standing, I extended my hand. "Will you walk with me please?"

"I'm working," she responded but there was no force behind it, only resignation.

"I'm sure I can convince Paolo to give you the time to take a walk," I responded jovially.

"So gallant," she murmured. "What's the reason? Or does Sicily bring out the best in you?"

I grinned.

"Got to keep Nonno happy."

The truth was that I felt more at ease here, in Nonno's home, than anywhere else in the world. It was my safety zone from when we were children and somehow the feeling remained. Truthfully, Nonno was always home. Not our father.

Margaret put her small hand into mine, and I helped her stand before we strolled out of the tavern just as Nonno's car pulled away. I could almost picture seeing his self-satisfied smug smile behind the tinted windows of his car.

If this plan worked, he'd probably take all the credit. Never mind that I came up with it.

The sounds of the waves against the shoreline traveled through the air. The sun shone brightly and warmed my skin. The temperatures in the

October air were still mild here. Heck, some old folks even dared to go for a swim.

I glanced at her. She fucking glowed. Her thick, coal-colored hair fell down her back, strands flying with the wind. Her eyes were lowered to the ground, watching her steps. Cobbled streets and pathways were aesthetically nice but a bitch to walk on. Especially for women.

We walked in silence, her hand still in mine. I was surprised she didn't pull it back. It felt right holding on to her. Her touch soothed something deep inside my soul.

She nudged me with her arm. "Why are you watching me like that?" she questioned.

Because you're beautiful. Because I like seeing you. Because something about you soothes the demons inside me.

Yet none of those words came out.

"Frankly, I'm waiting for you to bite my head off," I teased. It was a half-truth. Her eyes flicked my way. Silence settled between us for a moment as we locked eyes, but then she averted her gaze. A flush crept up her neck and colored her cheeks. "You still want to bite my head off, don't you?"

A sardonic breath left her. "It's been-" Her soft voice trailed off, searching for a word, but then she sighed tiredly. "It's been lonely," she admitted, keeping her eyes averted. "I–" She cleared her throat before continuing, "I miss my brothers. Talking to someone. Anyone. My Italian sucks and there are few people able to communicate with me here."

"If you'd only called me, I'd have flown over and talked to you." Her husky laugh lit up my body. She thought I was joking, but I fucking meant it. I'd have dropped everything and everyone. She was the reason I went against my father for the first time at the age of twelve.

He almost killed an innocent five-year-old girl. Something about the terror in her eyes pierced through my soul and I couldn't let him hurt her. So I attacked him. Stabbed him in the back. If only I'd aimed better and killed him right then and there.

"Talking to you would have been a welcome reprieve." The words poured from her lips and then as if she realized how that sounded, she quickly added, "Your grandfather has been wonderful. Some days he's kept me company. But he is one of the heads of the Sicilian mafia and not exactly friend material. So yeah, there is that."

We walked side-by-side toward the beach. Silence, once again, filled the air. I could almost hear the pitter-patter of her heart. She pushed a strand of hair behind her ear. She let out an exasperated sigh, glancing at her feet, then she stopped.

Wordlessly, I offered her my arm and she looped her hand through it, then held on as she slipped her shoes off.

“Let me,” I offered, taking the shoes from her and letting them dangle from my fingers.

We resumed walking, her feet bare against the cobblestone. Her hips swayed with each step, tempting me.

“Halloween is this month,” I remarked out of the blue.

Her soft chuckle rang through the air. “That’s an odd thing to be thinking about.”

The wind swept and her dress fluttered around her body, highlighting her belly. That was our baby growing inside her.

Never in a million years had I imagined myself becoming a father. Considering our family history, I thought it was better to end the King line. But then Bianca came into our lives. She gave me hope of normalcy. My nieces and their happiness was confirmation that it was doable.

And now I had a chance to have my own family. I fucking wanted it. There was no way I’d give it up. I’d fight for it. I’d fight for *us*. But I’d have to be careful because Margaret was a stubborn woman, and she hated the Kings.

Except now there was so much more at stake here. Our child. Her future.

I wanted to give my child a happy life. The kind that Nonno gave me and Cassio. So I’d pull her into my scheme and we’d work out the rest. We’d have our whole lives to figure it out.

“A Halloween party was where I first ran into you,” I remarked. “You were dressed up like the Black Widow.” She barely stiffened, but I noticed it. “It’s just a costume, Margaret.”

Glancing my way, she tilted her head. “You seem different,” she said pensively. “Here at least.”

A sardonic breath left me. “Usually I *am* different here,” I admitted. “My grandfather gave Cassio and me some semblance of safety when we were kids. It’s the only place where we knew we were safe so I guess it stuck. Whenever I’m here, I feel at home.”

Comfortable silence followed.

“You are different too,” I remarked. She tilted her head, her eyebrows furrowed.

“I guess you’re right,” she commented. “It has been lonely.” A soft sigh left her lips and she started rubbing her belly again. “Besides, I need friends here. I have a daughter to think about and don’t want her to grow up lonely.”

“Have you thought about a name for her yet?” I asked her. She shook her head in response even though I knew that she’d liked my mother’s name when Nonno mentioned it. “This island is a good place to raise a family,” I told her. “When I was a kid, summer visits to Nonno were my favorite.”

“Hmmm.” I didn’t know what she meant by that but I let her process the words. It wasn’t as if Margaret ever held back. “Why don’t you move here then? Rather than live in New York or wherever you live.”

Jesus, she didn’t even know where I lived and I knew how she liked to eat her corn flakes.

“I actually want to do that,” I answered, steering the conversation exactly where I wanted it. “But Nonno would have women lining up all day and night until I chose one and married her.”

Margaret stopped and turned to face me, then threw her head back and laughed. She laughed so hard, she ended up holding her belly. She laughed so hard I was worried she’d drop the baby right here and now.

“You poor thing,” she mused, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. “Oh my gosh. I haven’t had such a good laugh in a long time. Thank you.”

“Glad I can serve as your amusement,” I remarked dryly.

She was still smiling when she resumed walking, this time without holding my hand. Instead, her palm rubbed her belly absentmindedly. I wanted to touch her stomach, feel my daughter move against my palm so badly that my hands shook.

I shook my head. I had to stay cool, trap her into my plan, and then she’d be mine. We’d be a family.

“Actually, maybe–” I trailed off, feigning as if I was thinking about it when I knew exactly what I wanted. I left the sentence unfinished, waiting.

“Actually what?” she asked curiously.

I covered my mouth, hiding my smug grin. This had to be played right if she was to agree to it.

“I was thinking maybe you and I can help each other.” Her steps faltered again and she turned around, her blue eyes locked with mine.

Fuck, I’d volunteer to drown while staring at her blues. They were deep like the oceans under the bright sun. She shared her eye color with her cousin, Áine, but I felt nothing when I looked her cousin in the eyes.

With Margaret, I felt it all.

It was what caught me off guard that first time we met. And the second. The third time we crossed paths, I was done for. Hers. Although I didn’t realize how long it’d take me to get her to this spot.

“Luca?” Margaret’s voice pulled me back.

I pushed my hand through my hair. No wonder I was fucking obsessed with the woman. “Yeah.”

“You were saying?” Her lips curved into a soft smile. “About us helping each other?” she urged.

Jesus.

She had to remind me of my plan. I had to get my shit together.

“You know that your family won’t give up until you’re married, right?” I started. She didn’t need to answer. I could tell by the look on her face that she knew it. “They’ve been searching for you. Luckily, they’ve been searching in all the wrong places. But what if-” Fuck, if she said no, I didn’t know what to do next. I really didn’t want to force her to marry me. “What if we fool everyone?”

Curiosity sparked in her eyes.

“What do you mean? How?”

“What if you and I get married?” I suggested.

Her eyes widened in disbelief, seconds passed. Then she barked out an incredulous laugh.

“Why would I marry *you*? It’s not like we’re even friends! If you recall, I even shot you at one point!”

“It’d be a fake marriage but nobody would know. It’d stop Nonno from harassing me with women. And it’d stop your family from lining up prospects for you.”

A soft snicker left her lips. “Unless you missed this little part, Luca. My prospects usually wind up dead. I may not like you, but I don’t want to be responsible for your untimely demise.” That statement made me flinch. “I don’t think your Nonno would be too happy about that, and I’d hate for him to lose you.”

At least there wasn’t venom in her tone. Her feelings on that score appeared to be changing. Thank fuck. As for the mortality of her past fiancés, well, I had a direct hand in that so it was unlikely that I’d be slitting my own throat any time soon. However, that would probably be the wrong thing to admit right now.

“Not if we get married before we leave Sicily,” I suggested. “Nobody would know but you, me, and Nonno that we’re getting married. By the time anyone else found out, it would be too late.”

She stared at me as if I was crazy. Okay, now that I’ve said the words maybe it didn’t sound so brilliant, but fuck, I needed her wed to me. Before some other fucker tried to take her away from me. It was a miracle some asshole hadn’t tried to play *knight in shining armor* already.

Not that he’d live long enough to play the part.

Margaret Callahan was every man’s fucking fantasy come to life. Her gorgeous hair was long enough to wrap it around my fist. Twice. Trust me, I’d done it. This woman had a sharp tongue and a quick, biting wit, but in the bedroom she was all soft and yielding. And her expression as I fucked her… it burned through my skin and straight to my dick.

She was so damn sweet and eager. The only regret I had was that I couldn’t see her entire face as I fucked her that night in Vegas. To see her surrender to me completely, knowing it was me. That was my goddamn dream.

“You’d go that far for your grandfather?” she questioned softly, her tone turning serious. I nodded. “What if you end up dead too?” To her, it was a valid concern even if I knew it wasn’t. “Your grandfather, although a sweet old man, wouldn’t forgive his grandson’s death. And I don’t need more trouble at my doorstep.”

“You and I will tell him together of the men in the past who have died,” I explained. “My guess is he’ll find them at fault because they couldn’t defend themselves. Only the strong survive in our world, Margaret.” She blinked at my odd explanation, but she knew the words to be true. “It’d be win-win for both of us,” I added.

She lowered her eyes to her pregnant belly. “What about my baby?”

“I’ll help you raise her,” I stated. “Give her my name. I’ll keep you both safe.”

Her brows furrowed. “But it’s fake. And no offense, but I’d never want my daughter to carry that last name.”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Nobody else will know it’s fake. I could change my last name. Either way, your family won’t force anything on you once you’re married to me.”

She still seemed to struggle with the idea but I couldn’t give up. I needed her on board for this. Before I could say anything else, something flickered in her eyes and I cursed myself.

“I don’t know,” she noted in an uncertain voice. “Why would you go to such lengths?” she asked suspiciously.

“I’ll help you and you help me,” I repeated. “It’s a mutually beneficial agreement. I’d be honored to raise our daughter together.”

“Our?”

“If you marry me, both of you will be my responsibility and under my protection,” I told her. That was the right thing to say. Right?

Fuck, there wasn’t a chapter on this in *What to Expect When You’re Expecting*. I’d fucking drive the publishing house into the ground if they cost me my woman and child.

“It seems a crazy step to take,” Margaret murmured. I kept in my relieved sigh. Jesus, this was stressful, and I wasn’t even killing anyone.

“Are you happy? About the baby?” The words slipped before I could think twice about them. Luckily, she didn’t mind it. Pregnant Margaret Callahan was vastly different from the old Margaret I met that night all those years ago in Temptation.

“Yes,” she answered with a dreamy smile and my chest warmed. “I guess a boy in the underworld might be easier, but I can keep her safe.”

“We can,” I rasped, my throat squeezing. “If you’d let me help you, we could help each other.”

Silence stretched and I could practically see the wheels spinning in her mind. I’d have to tread carefully with her.

“Won’t your grandfather know it’s bullshit considering I’m so pregnant?” she questioned.

He would question, except he knew the baby was mine.

“He won’t. I’ll tell him you and the baby are mine.”

And they would be. For as long as my heart kept beating.

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Chapter Twenty-Two

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MARGARET

Being his.

Why did that sound like a deliciously bad idea?

It could be risky. For my daughter and for me. After all, I'd heard and seen what his father was capable of. I had nurtured this hate for this man and his family for too long. Although Nonno had shown me a different side to Luca and his brother.

Then there was his last name. My father would roll over in his grave if I took that last name.

But maybe it was time I let go of my hate and do what was best for my baby.

I had always wanted a warm, real marriage. My happily-ever-after, like in Disney movies. My parents' marriage was cold. I wasn't sure if Da loved my mother, but I knew she didn't love him. The only one she loved was herself.

Could I live for the rest of my life in a loveless marriage?

I was in the last trimester of my pregnancy. Nobody sane would want me so heavy and pregnant. Except for this man. Our paths had been crossing for years. Maybe we could help each other. It'd get my family off my back, and he'd make his grandfather happy. Luca just wanted to bring peace to his grandfather. I could actually appreciate the sentiment, and it made me see him in a completely different light.

The image of a playboy and the man who reminded me of his father slowly dimmed. It wasn't gone, but the comparison wasn't as sharp.

Straightening my shoulders, I met his gaze head on.

“There will be no sex,” I said. My voice was firm, but something inside me shook. “If you so much as put your hand on me, you’ll be dead by the morning.” His lips curved into a beautiful smile, making my heart go all wild. “No cheating either.” I paused, giving him time to comment. Anything. I realized the last term was ridiculous. Especially since I just stated no sex.

I cocked an eyebrow, waiting. He didn’t fail me. “No cheating,” he agreed. “But we’ll have to work on our relationship. I’m not a saint.”

“Okay, but we’ll have to take it super slow. It might take years.” Gosh, it was as if I was trying to convince him *not* to marry me. “If those terms are agreeable to you, then I accept your offer.”

It took him a moment too long to answer. “Deal.” Then he flashed me his brilliant grin. “I won’t fuck you until you beg me.”

My cheeks grew warm, but I refused to show the way his words impacted me. Luca certainly had a way with words.

So I scoffed. “That will never happen.”

I should have known he’d make me eat those words.

WE GOT to the spot that I usually visited, then both of us took a seat on the nearby stone wall that separated the road and the beach.

“Been stalking me?” I asked half-jokingly. There was no way that he’d bring me here accidentally.

“Nonno said it’s your favorite spot,” he noted, although he didn’t deny that he’d been stalking me.

“But he didn’t have to tell you that because you’ve been stalking me,” I declared. His expression remained unmoved. “How long have you been on this island exactly?”

“A few weeks give or take,” he answered vaguely.

That should have alarmed me, but I was long past that by now. I just wanted some peace. I sighed “Whatever. Have it your way,” I muttered, rubbing my belly,

He side-eyed me, his stare filling with a trace of dry amusement. “You’re a lot more relaxed than before.”

Taking a deep breath in, I slowly exhaled it. “I guess it’s the pregnancy. I’m hormonal, emotional but less tense. It’s not good for the baby to get worked up all the time.”

“I like this side of you,” he said.

Shock and warmth erupted in my chest. The hormonal and emotional side of me was winning. I didn’t really mind it.

“Or maybe I’m just happy I get to talk to someone without a language barrier,” I retorted dryly. “Maybe I was home sick and you’re the closest thing to home right now.”

He didn’t seem deterred. “I’ll take what I can get.”

“That doesn’t seem like a healthy mindset,” I remarked. “And you’ve never been the one to settle for crumbs, Luca King.”

A half-smile pulled on his lips. “I hadn’t realized you’ve been thinking about me so much, Margaret Callahan. It turns out you know me well.”

I rolled my eyes. “It was easy to figure you out when I kept bumping into you.”

“So it was you stalking me,” he teased, turning it all around.

“You wish,” I scoffed, rolling my eyes again. Despite his arrogance, my lips curved into a smile and all the while I rubbed my belly.

Luca’s eyes lowered to my stomach, his expression filling with something volatile and conflicted before he looked away. Uncertainty ran through me. What if he despised the baby when she was born because she wasn’t his?

My paranoid thoughts evaporated with his next words.

“Can I touch your stomach?” Confusion filled me as I searched his face, but his eyes were zeroed in on my stomach. Something dark as sin filled his expression, confusing me. “Can I feel her move?”

“Ummm… Sure.”

I watched in a daze as his hand moved slowly, slightly shaking until his palm pressed gently against my growing belly. The moment it touched me, the baby kicked. Then again. It was as if she woke up and started doing somersaults.

“We’ll keep her safe,” he rasped. “You and I.”

His eyes lifted to my face and our gazes clashed. Suddenly, all the worries about my baby’s safety vanished. I could feel the intensity of his protection, see the vow in his gaze, and it made my throat tighten.

A feeling bloomed in my chest, leaving me feeling raw. Exposed. I was suddenly in unfamiliar territory with him. I could feel his heat. Smell his citrusy cologne.

What the hell was happening to me?

He cleared his throat.

"She's active," he said, his voice neutral. "Must be a badass little girl, like her Mamma."

I smiled. "Maybe. Or maybe it's just you that has that impact on the Callahan women. We all want to kick your ass."

He smiled, but it didn't quite reach his eyes.

"I guess I'll have to work harder to have both of you like me more," he said, a hint of coarseness in his voice.

A heavy feeling pulled on my chest, consuming me. I pushed the feeling down, ignoring it. It was probably bad indigestion.

So I laughed it off and bumped my shoulder lightly against his. "You better. Or else–" I threatened half-heartedly.

"No more tavern. No more working for Paolo," he said, suddenly jumping to his feet and extending his hand. "Come and stay at the villa with us."

I put my hand in his, his strong fingers wrapping around mine.

"You had me at '*no more working for Paolo*'," I muttered, before realizing how that sounded.

He grinned, that familiar smug smirk back on his lips. "Ahh, my skills at charming are kicking up a notch."

"Don't lie to yourself," I mused, smiling.

I had no idea how we got here. All our bickering and hate just vanished, leaving us teasing each other on this beach.

The world certainly worked in mysterious ways.

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Chapter Twenty-Three

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MARGARET

DiMauro’s villa was charming.

The stone fence surrounded the property. The large villa sat on a hill overlooking the city with the sea on one side and mountains on the other. We drove for five miles through hillside fields with workers busy picking fruit and pruning trees. Crates full of colorful fruit sat along the side of the driveway on both sides. Though I had to question what fruit really ripened in October. So I looked it up - persimmons, pomegranates, figs, apples, and pears.

This place was amazing.

Turning my head, I looked at Luca. His left arm rested against the car window as he drove with his right one. He wore white pants and a black polo. He was so damn relaxed, it was hard to reconcile him to the man I always saw in three-piece-suits.

“So your grandfather runs the mafia and a fruit produce business?” I questioned, my tone slightly sarcastic. I couldn’t resist it, the two stark businesses so vastly different.

“It’s always good to have a backup plan,” Luca remarked, ignoring my sarcasm.

“What kind of fruit is it?” I questioned, glancing back outside.

“Olives, pomegranate, different kinds of nuts,” he answered.

I furrowed my brows. “Why does it smell like lemons then?”

He chuckled. “There are a lot of lemon and orange trees. They produce a pretty unique citrusy scent.”

We approached another gate and that one opened automatically. As we were passing it, Luca waved to the camera. So somebody was watching, I thought to myself.

Once we were through, the large piece of land opened up to a large villa in the center of it. White stone. Red shutters. A little pathway that led to a garden and a greenhouse.

“God, no wonder your Nonno is happy here,” I muttered. “I’d never want to leave.”

He grinned. “It’s good to hear you like it.”

I flicked a questioning look his way, but he was focused on parking the car so I returned my gaze to the house. Before my hand was on the handle of the door, Luca was already out of the car and around to open the door for me.

At least he is a gentleman, I mused.

Nonno was already out of his house, slowly making his way over to us with a big smile. He wore his signature wide-brimmed hat and his vintage suit with suspenders.

Luca rushed to his grandfather to help him, never letting go of my hand though he was careful not to move faster than I was capable of handling. Nonno noticed it and smiled.

“Margaret,” he beamed. “*Benvenuta*.” Welcome.

I knew that word. Paolo always welcomed everyone into his tavern. Well, everyone except me. Despite the fact that the head of the Sicilian mafia put in the word for me to get a job there, my poor waitressing skills erased any good graces granted.

“Grazie.” My accent was so awful I was afraid I might have butchered it, I quickly added, “Thank you.”

Nonno took both of my hands into his and squeezed. “Welcome home, Margaret. I hope you have many happy years here.”

I looked at Luca and raised my eyebrow in surprise. I thought we came to tell his grandfather together and yet, it seemed his grandfather already knew.

Nonno chuckled as if he read my thoughts. “I know an eager man when I see one.”

I studied Luca, trying to gauge his expression, but it was unmoved. He didn’t seem eager to me. Shrugging it off, I decided not to comment. Luca

took Nonno's cane, then we each took Nonno's arm and the three of us made our way slowly back into the house.

"We will have a caffe in my private garden," Nonno declared. Then as if he remembered, I was pregnant, he added, "And juice for Margaret."

The three of us sat down amidst plants and dwarf fruit trees, the scent of citrus all around me again.

"Water is fine," I told him quickly.

Nonno waved his hand like that wasn't good enough, and I had to bite the inside of my cheek so as not to burst into laughter. He issued orders to a woman with an apron and wrinkles on her face who had to be as old as Nonno.

"I can help her," I offered, pushing myself off the arm of the chair about to stand up when Luca's words stopped me.

"It's your funeral. Nobody goes into Pina's kitchen. She'll whip you."

My eyes flickered to the door she disappeared to. "But she's like ancient," I remarked.

"We Sicilians age like fine wine," Nonno said. "We are not ancient."

I could see where Luca's cockiness and smugness came from. He got it from his grandfather.

"Now, let's talk about the wedding," Nonno demanded. "It will be here. In this garden, the same one I married your Nonna in."

A slight pang of guilt hit me. It was clear he loved his wife and it felt like staining their memory to hold our wedding in the same spot as his. Luca and I didn't love each other. My eyes darted to Luca, giving him a pointed look. He ignored it.

"The sooner the better," Luca agreed with him,

I couldn't resist the little jab. "Scared you'll fall over like my last four fiancés?"

If I thought that'd surprise Nonno, I was dead wrong.

He cleared his throat and leaned back in his chair. He locked eyes with Luca and murmured something in Italian.

"No." Luca answered, then added more words in Italian.

"So all this talking in Italian is super sexy, but maybe you could switch to English," I remarked sweetly. "I want to know what you're saying. It obviously involves me."

There was something sly about the look they both gave me. Jesus, the way they crossed their legs and smiled, it was the picture of Luca in his old

age. An odd thump of my heart was the answer to the image.

There was something about growing old with him. To share all the good and bad with a person you could rely on. Could I rely on Luca?

“They weren’t good enough for you,” Luca finally said.

My brows furrowed. “You didn’t even know them,” I remarked with a scoff. “Heck, I barely knew their names.”

Nonno slammed the cane down. “Nobody cares for our children but us. Famiglia. DiMauro famiglia.”

I swallowed. Did Luca already lie to Nonno and tell him the baby growing in my belly was his?

Luca gave me a calm look, holding my gaze as he said the next words.

“Which is the reason I eliminated those men, Nonno.” My eyes widened, unsure whether I should go along with it, question his sanity, or possibly mine. He had to be bluffing. Right? He was just doing it to convince Nonno that the baby was his.

“Bene,” Nonno grinned. “Any man who thinks he can mess with our family will be a dead man.”

Uncertainty flickered through me. I grew up in a family where criminal activities were part of everyday life. I knew the risk that came through it. Though at this moment I wondered whether I was just exchanging the Irish mafia for the Sicilian one.

Of course you are, dolt.

Then why wasn’t I running?

The answer sat right next to me. He sat back, rested his arm behind my chair and his legs slightly parted. His gaze warmed the side of my face and my heart fluttered awkwardly, stealing my breath.

My body burned. My skin blushed, buzzing with an unexplainable thrill. Suddenly, the thoughts of murdered fiancés no longer relevant. I fought the urge to lean over and brush my body against his. To feel his heat.

“Now, let’s talk about the wedding,” Nonno declared.

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Chapter Twenty-Four

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LUCA

She belonged here.

It had only been a few days since she moved into Nonno's villa, and it was as if she was born here. She moved around the house as if she knew every corner of it. Either that, or my grandfather had told her stories of all the secret spaces Cassio and I had discovered through the years.

My grandfather and Margaret got along better than I could have ever hoped for. I was convinced Nonno was in love with my woman. If he wasn't family, my grandfather, and at his advanced age, I'd have to consider ending him.

I was well aware my jealousy was irrational.

Yet, the cure was still unavailable to me. When it came to this woman, all my feelings were enhanced tenfold.

I watched Margaret as she read to Nonno in her soft voice, all the while rubbing her belly. The change in her was pronounced and not because she was pregnant. It was inside her. It was like all her demons and hate stayed back in New York.

Here she was a completely different person. Maybe this was the woman she was meant to be all along. Away from the past sins that our parents committed. Away from the Callahans. Although I knew she missed her brothers. A lot. I caught her pulling up a few articles about them. They were old, but she'd sit there and stare at the pictures.

So I resolved to have them here for our wedding. For her.

The line rang as it connected us across the ocean to her oldest brother.

"Hello."

Aiden Callahan sounded tired. And I knew exactly why. His baby sister didn't stick to the plan and instead of her going to Northern Italy, Margaret decided to hide in Sicily. According to Nico's reports, he'd been worried sick. Much to his dismay, he learned of the agreement between Marchetti and Callahan much too late so his worry magnified.

He thought he threw her to the wolves.

He did, just not the kind that he thought.

"Aiden," I greeted him. "Luca King here."

"What the fuck do you want?"

Ever since Cassio's plan of switching brides, I'd been on the Callahan brothers shitlist. Just by blood relation to my brother. Plus, it didn't help that Margaret had despised me. Until now.

"I hear you're looking for your sister," I drawled, leaning back in my chair and keeping my eyes on Margaret and Nonno in the garden. I could see them from here and though I couldn't hear them, I could see every time their backs shook from laughter. Damn if it didn't make me love her even more.

My heart stilled. *Love?*

No, it couldn't be. I shook my head as if to confirm my thoughts.

No, not love. Obsession, yes. Lust, yes. But not love.

"What's it to you?" Aiden spat. I could hear the anger and frustration in his tone. Margaret was so much like her brother. More so Aiden than the twins. Those two seemed to have their own thing going on that nobody else was privy to. Like their goddamn ménage à trois they seemed to love.

"I could help." Or hinder, depending on how he looked at it.

A pause, a heartbeat too long. "You know where she is."

It was a statement. Aiden wasn't stupid. It was the reason his uncle chose him to run the Callahan mafia. He had been grooming him for a long time.

"I do. And I'm marrying her." There was certainly a better way to drop the happy news on him, but fuck it. Might as well jump all the way in.

"You're what?" he growled.

So to ensure he understood, I repeated the words slowly, "I am marrying Margaret."

"You motherfucking Kings," he growled. "Always zooming in on our women." Okay, so he didn't take the news as well as I hoped. "You touch

her, Luca, and you'll be a dead man. Fuck the alliance. Fuck everything. I'll make you scream in agony."

He loved me already. I could feel all that love traveling through the line and just warming my heart. If only he knew I touched Margaret already. More than touched. And she… fuck, just thinking about that night and those moans eight months ago had all the blood rushing to my groin.

Bad timing.

"You can make me scream, but it will be after I wed your sister," I told him calmly. "Now, you can calm down and join us for the wedding. She'd want you here. Or you can steam like a fucking crab in New York."

Truthfully, I was too happy to gather some grudge or anger towards him. Margaret agreed to marry me. Of her own free will. Yes, her clause was no sex, but we'd overcome that bridge too. We were what people called a work in progress.

"Steam like a crab?" Aiden muttered. "Who in the fuck says shit like that? And what do you mean, she wants me there? You make it sound like she's agreeing to wed you when you're forcing her. Margaret despises you. She set your car on fire just because you defended her."

Okay, I spoke too soon. Now he was pissing me off.

"No, I'm not forcing her," I gritted. "The two of us came to an accord."

"Bullshit."

"Believe what you want," I told him. "Or you can ask her yourself if you want to come for the wedding. I want to surprise her."

That must have made him pause, but before he could come up with some brilliantly stupid plan, I added, "Only you and your brothers. And all the arrangements will be made for you. All you have to do is give me a yes or a no."

Aiden let out a few Gaelic curses. "Since Margaret has left New York, I learned that there is an unwritten rule between the Callahans and Marchettis. We can't cross into his territory, and he'll stay out of ours. I've been worried sick about my sister."

I could hear the anguish in his voice. "I've come to an agreement with Marchetti," I told him, keeping it vague. "He won't touch Margaret, you nor your brothers. The same doesn't extend to your uncle though."

"So you want us to come on your word," he hissed. "Why don't you bring my sister home and marry her here?"

I knew what that entailed. Callahan would take her away from me.

“I’m marrying your sister in Sicily. In my domain. With or without you.”

“Fuck you, asshole.” *Oh, he’s so coming*, I thought smugly. He wouldn’t be able to resist seeing his sister and to ensure she was doing this willingly. “Yes, I’m coming.”

Fuck, I love being right.

“Have your passport ready and someone will pick you up. You’ll fly on my plane.”

After I hung up with him, I dialed Cassio. *Riiing. Riiing.*

He answered on the third ring. “Luca, what the fuck have you been doing in Italy for over a month now?”

I hadn’t told him my plan. I didn’t want to risk Áine getting wind of it, or she would have definitely warned her cousin. Although not even she knew where Margaret was. But if Cassio knew, he’d have told her. So I left him in the dark.

“I’m getting married,” I told him calmly. “You think you could get your ass here for a wedding this Saturday?”

It seemed today was a day for dropping bombs on everyone.

“Who in the fuck are you marrying?”

I heard a faint voice in the background. “Luca’s getting married?”

“So it seems, though it’d be good to know to whom.” Cassio’s response was a jab at me.

“You’ll find out,” I told him, smiling smugly. “If you can make it, I’ll arrange a plane. All you have to do is have your passport ready.”

“Is my wife invited?” he asked dryly.

“Of course. She’s family.”

That cross Atlantic flight would have been so much fun to witness.

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Chapter Twenty-Five

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MARGARET

Living with Luca and his grandfather proved to be very pleasant.

We had a routine going. In the morning, Luca handled his businesses back in the States while Nonno and I went for a stroll around the garden. Then we'd have lunch together and most of the time, Luca would join us.

They'd discuss current events, some legal and some illegal, then Nonno would take a nap and I'd roam the property. Sometimes Luca joined me.

The sun warmed my skin as I wandered through the rows of trees full of ripening fruits and nuts. I wore stretchy shorts and a loose pink top with thick straps. The further along I was in my pregnancy, the hotter I was. This had to be what going through menopause felt like.

So much to look forward to, I mused wryly.

"Ciao, bella." Hot breath against my earlobe had me startling, my body jolting backwards.

A set of strong arms caught me before I lost my balance.

"What the fuck, Luca? Trying to kill me before we get married?"

He chuckled softly. "If I wanted to kill you, I'd eat your pussy and give you an orgasm."

I blinked and my mouth parted with a gasp. But then I quickly got myself together.

"Someone thinks highly of himself," I snickered, though there was no bite to my tone. In fact, I sounded breathless.

"I feel challenged," he drawled with that smug smile I have come to know so well. Except, here he was also charming and laid back. My eyes

traveled over his tall frame. He wore casual white slacks and an olive green polo shirt matching his eyes when the sun hit them. I liked him like this.

He slid his hands into his pockets. Something told me it was to appear non-threatening.

I shook my head.

“If you think I’ll sleep with you out here in the dirt, you are *pazzo*.”

Crazy. I learned that word and loved saying it. It rolled off my tongue effortlessly.

He hooked his arm around me.

“No need to make excuses, bella.” God, he was taunting me again. No other man ever got to me like this one. “I have a picnic set up for us. Let's relax. If a blanket over the dirt works for you, I can prove my point in our picnic spot.”

I just about tripped but pressed my lips together. He was baiting me. I knew it.

The unnerving part was that I was tempted. I wanted to see what my future husband was packing. I wanted to touch him. *Taste* him.

As if he could read my thoughts, he added casually. “It will be a one way street. I eat your pussy, no return favors.”

My mouth dropped. What man in their right mind didn’t want the favor returned?

Flicking him a side-glance, I studied his expression. He seemed serious.

So much for tasting him, I sighed silently.

As we stopped at the picnic spot, he held my hand, assisting me as I sat down. The smell of fruit and vineyards fragranced the air. The soft breeze swept through the field. It was kind of romantic.

I mentally slapped myself. I had clearly lost my mind.

“It’s okay if you’re scared, mia bella.”

An exasperated groan left me.

“Okay, Luca King,” I breathed. Much to my dismay, my cheeks burned and my voice trembled. “Let’s do this. But if I’m still alive after this supposedly killer orgasm, you will owe me.”

My mind was in such shambles I couldn’t even think of what to ask for. These pregnancy hormones made me so horny, and I’d had no one but myself to satisfy the cravings. At this point, I was so big, I could no longer do much, and it was driving me crazy. It had to be the only reason I was even considering this!

This man turned my brain to mush, and I had lost the ability to think smartly.

The smile he gave me just about blinded me. It wasn't smug nor conceited. It was the kind of smile that stole your breath away.

"Lead the way," I muttered, excitement running through my veins. It took less than two minutes to get to the picnic spot. I wasn't certain if it was me, or him, but our steps rushed to it too eagerly.

Once by the laid out blanket, he gently nudged me to lay on my back. He slid off my slip on shoes, followed by my shorts. Then his rough palms traced my ankles up my legs and to my inner thighs until his face was close to my pussy. The only barrier between his mouth and my pussy were my thin panties.

As he kissed my inner thigh, his strong hands held me in place. A shudder rolled down my spine and suddenly I feared maybe he did want to kill me. With pleasure.

"If I die from the orgasm, just make sure you get my baby out," I said for some stupid reason.

His touch was tender. His look, one of reverence.

His dark eyes met mine, and somewhere deep in his gaze, I found something I couldn't quite put into words.

He pulled my panties down my legs and discarded them next to him. Then he brought his face close to my lower lips, his hot breath against my pussy doing things to me.

"I can smell your arousal," he breathed, then the tip of his tongue touched my folds and my head fell back. My eyes fluttered shut and sensation filled every single inch of me. "Put your hands on your tits, bella."

God, his voice in that low tone was like my personal sex line. Or maybe my hormones were so jacked up that everything turned me on.

I cupped my breasts through my shirt, which were heavy and aching, and squeezed my nipples. Pleasure shot through me. A moan left my lips. God, it had been so long since a man had touched me.

Luca dipped his head and licked me, and all thought evaporated. Growling, he pressed his face closer, his stubble rough against my soft skin and he tongued my entrance.

"Fuck, you are so wet for me."

Was I wet for him? Or was this just a normal bodily response? I was scared to learn the answer.

He began moving his lips and tongue until he reached my clit. The first swipe of his tongue over it caused my hips to buck and throw my head back. It was electric, sensual and he hummed his approval. Tingles ran up and down my legs and I could only lie there as he did it again and again, flicking and circling the nub with his tongue.

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.” I was so close. The man was so damn good at this.

His finger worked its way into my pussy, stretching me, and I moaned.

“Oh, my God, Luca,” I cried out. My hips ground against his face. “Don’t stop. It feels so–”

That earned me another finger and a long suck of my clit. My toes curled, and I could feel the orgasm building in my belly. It felt like a strong force of a hurricane that I worried whether it was healthy for the baby.

“I’m so close,” I breathed, tiny whimpers leaving my lips. “Oh, God. Keep going, please.”

My hips rocked hard against his face, my body desperate for release.

He was right. This could kill me, in the best possible way.

Luca continued to lap my clit and pump his fingers into my pussy. It was on the tip of my tongue to beg him to fuck me. I needed it like the air I breathed. The thought of his muscled body pounding into me pushed me over the edge.

My walls convulsed around his fingers, my limbs shaking and moans shattered the air. The most intense orgasm of my life washed over me, causing my heart to beat so fast that I thought it would cause a heart attack.

Luca never eased lapping up the wetness, his eyes closed, savoring me, as if he was enjoying this more than I was.

I sagged into the blanket, limp. Luca’s mouth gentled but he refused to stop. Each lap of his mouth sent a shiver down my spine. I stared at his beautiful face and something in my chest shifted. It terrified me. It thrilled me.

Hormones, my reason whispered.

His eyelids opened and our gazes clashed. The hazel in his eyes was greener than ever before. A fresh shot of desire rushed through me and I licked my lips. He continued to taste me while staring up at me. I couldn’t look away. I didn’t want to, scared I’d miss a single moment of the most sexually appealing man I’d ever known.

Then he crawled over me, his mouth coming within an inch from my lips. His chin glistened with my juices and I was tempted to dart my tongue out to taste myself on his lips.

I didn't.

"This was a one-time thing," I rasped in a hoarse voice.

The edges of his mouth curled. "Whatever you want, bella."

Except, it sounded the exact opposite. The look in his eyes told me there'd be a lot of fucking going on. Jesus, or maybe my wishes were reflected in them. I was so goddamn confused.

"I'm serious, Luca," I breathed.

He lifted to his full height. "So am I, Margaret. I'm a very patient man."

He gently helped me to my feet, chastely kissed my cheek with that filthy mouth, and then left without another word or a backward glance. I looked on, dumbfounded as I contemplated the meaning of those words.

Oh God. I needed to do a better job of resisting him.

AN HOUR later I headed back to the villa.

My cheeks burned remembering the incident earlier. Luca was too easy to cave into. Besides, no sex worked against me. Although I have to admit, I didn't hate Luca's hands on me. In fact, I loved it.

Anyhow, it was best not to read too much into it.

I took my time getting ready tonight. I took a shower, then put some mascara on and lots of lotion all over my body. I was slightly paranoid about the stretch marks that were bound to follow after I gave birth. So I applied extra lotion, just in case.

For dinner together, I chose a yellow maxi dress that didn't hide my pregnant belly, but it still made me feel attractive.

Heading down the stairs, I went into the dining room where Nonno and Luca already sat at the table. Guido too. He was Nonno's long standing bodyguard-slash-friend-slash-cousin.

Luca and Nonno stopped talking immediately, their eyes coming my way. Nonno wore his usual, but Luca looked handsome. Too handsome for his own good. Or my good. He wore a white dress shirt, the first two

buttons at his throat undone, revealing his dark skin and glimpses of his tattoos.

My step faltered and suddenly the images of the night in Vegas slammed into my brain. I never got to study my stranger's inked skin. It was too hard to see through the mask and he kept the room dark.

But the stranger's touch… It was the same feeling I had with Luca when he touched me earlier.

A rush of desire swept through me and I swallowed hard.

My orgasm was fucking with my head. I had to forget about all that.

Luca's eyes swept over my body, lingering on the glimpse of my bare ankles before returning to my face. There was no trace of that smugness I had come to know in his eyes. Only lust that burned and caused throbbing between my thighs.

"Sit next to me," Luca stated. His smoldering gaze told me he was used to getting his own way. For once, I didn't mind it. I took a spot next to him and his hand came to rest on my thigh, searing through my dress.

Jesus, what was happening to me? There wasn't even anything sexual about his touch.

"Nonno suggested something, and I'd like your opinion," Luca said, pulling my thoughts away from everything sexual.

My eyes traveled curiously around the table. Nonno had a smug, happy smile on his face. Strangely enough, Guido looked slightly put off. Or maybe that was his agitated look.

"Bene, bene," Nonno said with a grin. "It's good to consult with your wife when making such big decisions."

I didn't bother correcting him that we weren't married yet. Instead, I returned my eyes and locked gazes with Luca. I could feel a slight heat enter my cheeks, but I was determined not to make this sexual.

We'd be equals. Partners. Although if he touched another woman, she'd be dead before sunrise.

The violence of the thought surprised me.

"How do you feel about marrying Luca DiMauro rather than Luca King?" His question had me widening my eyes. "Nonno wants to pass on the DiMauro business to us. You and me."

I opened my mouth. No words came out. So I closed it and opened it again. "With the baby, not sure I can do much," I admitted softly.

Nonno chuckled. “No job murdering people for my girls. You will be Luca’s sounding board. Like my wife was mine.” A soft smile curved my lips. I didn’t hate the idea at all. In fact, I liked it.

My eyes darted to Luca. “How do you feel about it?”

A sardonic breath left Luca. “I was always more DiMauro than King. This island was where I was always happy. Not in New York. And certainly not with my father. Nonno is family. Benito never was.”

A hint of bitterness inched its way from his lips and into my heart. I could only fathom how hard it was growing up under the cruelty of Benito King.

My tongue swept across my bottom lip. “Truthfully, I don’t mind it,” I admitted softly.

“You’d be okay living in Sicily instead of New York?” Luca asked. “You are a New Yorker through and through.”

I smiled. “I came to a revelation that I like Europe better. So no, I wouldn’t mind. As long as the baby is safe.”

My hand roamed my belly gently, feeling my baby girl kick. It seemed she was happy too.

“We’ll keep her safe,” Luca said. “Forever.”

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Chapter Twenty-Six

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MARGARET

I stared at my gown in the mirror.

The dress was beautiful. It belonged to Luca's grandmother and Nonno said he hoped one day his Penelope would wear it. When he handed it to me, it was with hope in his eyes and despite the farce Luca and I were cooking, I couldn't say no.

It meant a lot to him. And somehow it meant a lot to me to give Nonno that simple little thing. Luca and I were getting married in the same church as his grandparents. Then we'd have the reception back at Nonno's place. Just like he had it with his Nonna way back when.

My hands were splayed against my pregnant belly. The dress was flared from the bodice in an empire waist design with long sleeves, a low-cut back, and a train that flared out behind me. The fabric was soft and the dress fit me perfectly, as if it was designed for me.

Or maybe Nonna was pregnant too when they got married, I mused.

"You look gorgeous. Just like our sister should." Aiden's deep voice came from behind me.

My eyes caught the reflection of my brothers and Áine standing at the door that separated this room from the church. I blinked. They were still there.

"Beautiful." The twins concurred. "But then, she's always been beautiful."

Slowly, I turned, the rustle of the wedding dress following my movement, to find them standing at the doorway.

My family. My brothers were always it for me. And when Uncle married, Áine joined our circle effortlessly.

It wasn't my parents. It wasn't even my uncle. It was always my brothers.

My bottom lip trembled. It wasn't until this very moment that I realized what bothered me all day. The idea of doing this without people I loved.

And here they were.

"What- How-" I couldn't form a question.

"You didn't think I'd let you marry Luca King without seeing you first and making sure this was of your own free will."

A breath left me and tears burned the back of my eyes.

"Luca DiMauro," I murmured.

When they all gave me a blank stare, I clarified. "He's changed his name to Luca DiMauro."

A shaky smile formed on my lips. I actually loved that he'd be a DiMauro. And he'd give my baby her last name too. She wouldn't be connected to the man who killed my da. She'd be a DiMauro. It felt like a fresh start.

"And yes, I'm doing this of my own free will," I said.

Áine rushed over to me. "Luca called Cassio. That rascal just told us he was getting married, but not to whom. Then demanded we have our passports ready and board a plane."

My throat squeezed and I blinked hard, keeping those traitorous, hormonal tears away. Her hands came around me and hugged me.

"I missed you so much," she murmured. "And your brothers are right. You look beautiful," she said in a soft voice.

She smiled, then took a step back and my three brothers sandwiched me between them. They hugged me tightly.

"You didn't stick to the plan, little sister," Aiden reprimanded, but there was no real scolding in his voice.

"He even asked our help to find you," Tyran grumbled. "We had to kick his ass and then start the search. What kind of Irishman sends his sister to Italy?"

"She was supposed to go to Northern Italy," Aiden grumbled. "Not in the heart of the Italian mafiosos."

I looked up at Aiden and we both smiled. The twins had each other's back. Aiden and I had ours.

“A smart one,” I replied. “And, my dear brother, I improvised.”

A dark expression passed my brother’s face. “Truthfully, Italy, in general, wasn't a good choice. Turns out there was a condition to the peace treaty between Uncle Jack and Enrico Marchetti when Uncle had Marchetti’s brother killed. Uncle forgot to mention it when I stepped into the role. Sending you to Italy wasn’t that smart. If that guy would have gotten ahold of you, he’d have killed you.”

My brows furrowed. I hadn’t heard about a war between Marchetti and Callahans. If there was one, then the baby and I couldn’t stay in Italy. I’d have to talk to Luca about it later.

“Is it safe to be here?” I questioned. “For all of us.”

Aiden nodded. “Yes, Luca assured me that Marchetti gave him a free pass.”

The boys took a step back and my oldest brother reached into his pocket, then handed me a box. My eyes darted to it and then to him.

“For something old,” he explained, opening the box and handing it to me. It was a rosary. I stiffened. Having anything of mother’s for something old was as appealing as offering myself to a butcher to slice and dice me. No, thank you.

“It’s not mother’s,” Tyran clarified.

He grabbed my hand and put it into it.

“Our grandma died before you were born, but she was religious,” Aiden said. “And she told me to make sure the first one of us to get married used it as something old.”

The fact she gave it to Aiden and not my mother spoke volumes. According to what I’d heard, Grandma wasn’t fond of Mother either.

“And I have something borrowed,” Áine chimed in, handing me her veil and a tiara.

An incredulous breath escaped me. I wondered why Nonno only spoke of a dress and never a veil. I just assumed maybe they didn’t have one back then.

She helped me put it on, and when I glanced at my reflection, it completed the dress perfectly. As if they belonged together.

“We have something blue for you,” the twins announced.

I reached for my bouquet of bluebells on the little table. Then an idea struck me. I wrapped the rosary around the stems and left the cross dangling in the front and over my fingers.

The mischievous look the twins gave me told me that wouldn't be enough.

"Did you know that blue in the wedding is meant to ward off the Evil Eye?" I frowned. I thought it represented purity, love, and fidelity. At least that was what I heard Áine's mother screech during her big day.

It was only then I noticed that Kyran had a big box in his one hand.

I shook my head. "Unless that's a wrap or something, I won't be able to wear it."

Tyran and Kyran shared a look, then ripped open the box. "Tada."

Leaning slightly over, I peeked inside the box and found a light baby blue pair of pumps.

"Shoes?" I asked dumbly.

"Not just any shoes," Kyran claimed. "They are Christian Louboutin."

"Oh."

Disappointment washed over the twin faces. "I told you she wouldn't want shoes," Tyran grumbled. "Pregnant women's feet grow when they are knocked up."

"No, they don't," I protested. "They just swell."

"So you don't like this for something blue?" Kyran asked, his expression falling. But it was his eyes that betrayed him. They twinkled with mischief and manipulation.

They were both playing me like a fiddle, but today, I didn't mind. They came for me. Yes, it was a fake wedding but nobody would know it but Luca and I. Maybe it was good to have more witnesses.

"Help me put them on," I told them both. "But I'm taking them off when my feet start hurting."

Victorious expressions crossed their eyes at the same moment. Freaking manipulators.

"Of course," Kyran quickly said, noting I read them like an open book. "We want our niece healthy and not ruined by these expensive Christian Louboutin pumps."

Tyran lowered down and helped me slide off my current white flats, then put one shoe on.

"How do you two know about Christian Louboutin anyhow?" I asked incredulously.

The two were killers, not shoe shoppers.

A fleeting shared gaze by the twins, before Tyran replied, "A friend."

Needless to say, it had to be a girlfriend. And this was why I always thought these two shared a girlfriend. But it wasn't like I'd ask and they'd answer. For two mischievous devils, Tyran and Kyran were notoriously private. While they shared a lot with me, their sex life was always off limits.

Hmmm, come to think of it, so was Aiden's. None of them ever brought a girl home. And I had yet to see them with a girlfriend, although I heard others mentioned they'd see them with this girl or that girl.

"Now, you are perfect," my brothers exclaimed.

Aiden lowered my veil before he offered me his arm. "We tossed a coin," he admitted. "I won."

He cheated, he meant but I didn't say anything. I was just happy to have them with me. I looped my arm with his and we headed for the door when it opened to find about fifty people or so standing up.

"You guys know that something blue is actually to ward off infertility," Áine remarked in a whisper, humor lacing her voice. I looked over my shoulder to find her talking to the twins.

"You–"

But before I could turn around and beat them with my bouquet, Aiden urged me forward.

Everyone waited. Watched. Smiled.

My brothers forgotten, I took a step forward and a collective, soft gasp filled the air.

My eyes found the man waiting at the end of the aisle. Help came from the most unlikely place.

His eyes were on me.

Candles lit the way, the evening sun glittered, shining through the darkness. Apparently, I became poetic in my pregnancy too.

My mind whispered. *It's fake. It's fake. It's fake.*

But Luca's expression was a bit too real. Butterflies worked overtime in the pit of my stomach. Luca met us before we reached the altar and a soft chuckle came from the front pew from his Nonno.

Maybe he was just playing his part. It didn't feel like it, but then we were all good actors when we needed to be.

Cassio stood as his brother's best man. Suddenly, I had a maid-of-honor. Yet, none of it mattered but *him*.

Luca shook Aiden’s hand and then my brother lifted my veils and placed a soft kiss on my cheek.

“If he makes you cry, I’ll kill him and make you a widow.” The words were spoken in a whisper, but they echoed through the church.

Luca grinned and patted him on the back. I sighed, almost collapsing in fear. At least Luca took it as a joke. Although knowing Aiden, he was dead serious.

Then Luca offered me his hand and I took it. He always portrayed that confidence and while it annoyed me when we first met, it fed mine today. My steps were steady and my head held high as we closed the distance to the altar where the priest waited for us.

We faced each other. Spoke our words. Made our promises in front of God and witnesses.

Guilt twisted in my chest. *This is fake. This is fake. This is–*

The third chant was forgotten as Luca slipped a ring on my finger. A diamond and blue sapphire band. Before I could panic, I was handed his wedding ring.

When I searched his face, he murmured low so only I could hear him. “Nonno’s ring.”

My eyes flicked to Nonno grinning in the front pew. He looked the happiest I’d seen him. His grin was wide. His dark eyes shone, reminding me of stars against the night. Luca was right. This wedding was doing him good.

I nodded in a silent thank you for everything he’d done for me. Not just today, but from the moment we met.

As the priest said the final words, pronouncing us husband and wife, Luca leaned in, bending his head and his lips touched mine, sealing our deal.

His mouth pressed against mine, roughly, yet gently. Devouring and enthralling. The taste of him, cinnamon and spicy, reminded me of something but my brain was too hazy to remember. Instead, I soaked up the taste of him. His tongue tangled with mine and all the thoughts evaporated out of my mind. I just felt him, letting him consume me.

His hand on my waist and his mouth on my lips felt like an ice cube melting on bare heated skin on a hot summer day. I couldn’t quite decide whether it was healthy or not. Rough waves washed over my skin.

He is a drug.

If I wasn’t careful, he’d become my drug of choice.

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

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MARGARET

Colorful flower arrangements decorated the entire back yard of Nonno's villa. The orange and lemon trees fragranced the air. And birds chirped their excitement singing along with the soft music in the background.

Luca and I moved on the dance floor that was set up in the large yard of his grandfather's villa with magnificent views of the sea and mountains.

People watched us dancing our first dance as husband and wife. The atmosphere was almost surreal. A small wedding turned out to be not so small after all. Nonno had way too many associates that would feel offended if he hadn't invited them. So here we were, a hundred guests, give or take.

This was a solution for both Luca and I. A sort of an arranged marriage that we both agreed to. It was kind of fake. Right?

Except if all this was fake, why did it feel so real? The way Luca watched me, his eyes steady on me, made it feel real. Too real.

We moved as one to the tune of some old Italian song. We didn't have a song and the first song we met under certainly wasn't appropriate. I could only imagine how this traditional audience would react to the song "Fuckboy" as our first dance. It was what I'd called him the first time we crossed paths. The timing of the song was opportune and coincidently appropriate back then.

Yet, I couldn't have been more wrong about him.

"This view is breathtaking," I admired, my eyes soaking in the dreamlike landscape.

He twirled me out before pulling me back, so I came back into his body. He was a smooth dancer, but then I already knew that. I'd seen him dance before with other women.

"It's the most beautiful view I have ever seen," he agreed.

His grin came slow, his eyes never wavering from me and watching me with an unreadable expression.

"Thank you for bringing my brothers." God, when he watched me like that, I could melt into a puddle and give in to him. But I wouldn't. Because this was fake. F.A.K.E. "How did you convince them?"

Luca chuckled. "They thought I was forcing you to marry me. So like a pack of wolves they rushed to ensure you were safe."

I shook my head. "Stop taunting them."

He gave me an innocent look, barely containing his smile. God, he could be mischievously handsome when he wanted to. It was becoming too hard to keep him at arm's length.

Forgetting that this was a mutually beneficial arrangement would be a mistake. I'd have to keep reminding myself of that. Somehow Luca King, correction, DiMauro, had quickly become a man that I liked, instead of a man I despised. Truthfully, I didn't think I ever truly hated him. Either way, I didn't despise him any longer. Maybe hormones had something to do with that too.

He raised his hand to others to have them join the dance. The guests didn't need another nudge. They quickly swarmed the dance floor.

"I know you're close with them," Luca replied. "I wanted you to have at least that. I'm sorry I didn't bring your mother."

I shook my head. "It's better you didn't." He nodded in understanding. "So you know all these people?" I asked, changing subjects.

I didn't want to venture into the topic of my mother. Not today at least.

People ate, laughed, and danced. Everyone seemed to be having fun, despite the fact nobody knew me. All in all, the day came pretty close to perfect. I danced with Nonno, then each one of my brothers. Even Cassio asked for a dance.

He stood, holding out his hand, and I reluctantly accepted. It wasn't as if we hated each other, but somehow we always steered clear of each other.

The music drifted through the breeze and the two of us danced, keeping plenty of space between us. My baby ensured it.

Cassio and his brother shared a physical appearance. Anyone with two eyes could spot it. Apparently, I didn't have two eyes because that day in Vegas, in front of the elevators and during that ride, it never dawned on me that I was looking at Cassio King. Luca was the only one I noticed. He must have hindered my observation skills.

Still, even with their physical resemblance, they couldn't be more different. Luca was more impulsive and hid himself under layers of nonchalance. At least that was what I came to find over the last week.

Cassio, on the other hand, was cold and manipulative. Out of the two, Cassio was probably more likely to turn into their father. It was probably good for everyone in this world that he didn't, because my gut told me he'd wreak more havoc than his father ever could.

"Don't tell me you have nothing to say, Sister?" I stiffened slightly at that title. I didn't think I'd ever be able to think of him as a brother. "Or would you prefer I call you sister-in-law?"

"It doesn't matter to me," I said quickly.

He let out a breath. "You don't trust me, do you?"

"You haven't exactly earned my trust," I answered harshly, then realized it wasn't fair to lay all the blame on him. I made my mistakes willingly too. If I hadn't acted recklessly in Vegas… Well, no matter. Ifs wouldn't make any of this change. For once, I truly believed I was exactly where I needed and wanted to be.

We danced in silence, his steps slower for my sake.

"Your husband is glaring at me," Cassio teased, tilting his head in Luca's direction. I followed his gaze and sure enough, Luca had his eyes narrowed on his big brother, mouthing silently 'Get a move on.'

I shook my head, smiling, then returned my attention to Cassio.

"How do you feel about his last name change?" I asked him.

He gave me a pensive look.

"Sad and happy." I furrowed my brows in confusion. "I'm happy for Luca. He always hated all our association with the last name King. He was more our mother's son then he was ever our father's." That certainly went along with the statement Nonno gave me. "Sad for me because I'm the only fucker left with that cursed last name."

Okay, that was unexpected.

"Well, Áine has that last name now as well," I reminded him softly. "And your children will. Maybe you can turn it around."

“I hope so.”

He studied me, and it took all I had not to look away. He could be intimidating. The ink that marked his skin on his neck and hands gave off ‘don’t fuck with me’ vibes. Luca didn’t have any openly visible ink, and I had to admit, I kind of liked that cleaner look. Although I knew without a shred of doubt, Luca was anything but a clean cut guy. He was a bad boy charm that could literally melt your panties.

I could vouch for it. Our little “picnic” was the hottest thing I’ve experienced in a long time. Picnic would never have the same meaning again.

“Anyhow, changing his last name to DiMauro is the right move. He’ll take over Sicily after Nonno and people will follow him. He has always been the happiest here. This is his home.”

It was all the confirmation I needed. Sicily felt like home too. Life certainly worked in mysterious ways.

Nonno cut our dance short.

He took my hand, then walked me around introducing me to everyone. His cousins. His distant relatives. And then the few remaining, living friends.

“This is Enrico Ferrara Marchetti,” he made an introduction. Two bodyguards lingered behind him. I craned my neck to meet his eyes and… *whoa*. Just whoa. I had never seen a silver fox before but this man was particularly close to one. He was handsome with broad shoulders that filled his three-piece-Brioni suit. Power rolled off his frame in waves.

Dangerous. Ruthless. He was important.

Nobody had to tell me that.

His piercing eyes drifted over me, that thick, dark hair with a hint of silver at his temples indicated experience. It contributed to the man’s appeal. It certainly didn’t take a single thing away from him.

“His father and I were very good friends.”

I nodded once.

He extended his hand and I put my palm into his big one.

“Mr. Marchetti,” I said with a smile. By this point, my cheeks hurt from holding a smile for that long. “Thank you for coming.”

Luca appeared out of nowhere, his arm coming around me to rest on my side.

“We’re certainly honored,” Luca added in a cold tone.

My eyes darted between my new husband and Mr. Marchetti. He seemed important, but I had never heard his name before. Not during my stay in Italy and not back home. Yet, I'd stake my life that he was part of the underworld. There was a harsh ruthlessness about him despite his easy manner. It was in the ghosts lurking in his eyes.

"I wouldn't miss it," he said, stepping closer, until he towered over me. It wasn't hard. He rivaled Luca in his size. His eyes traveled over my pregnant belly. "You've been busy."

My cheeks flushed. Luca's palm came to rest gently against the swell of my belly.

"You know what they say," Luca drawled. "No better time than the present to have a baby. And now that we're married in front of God, we are back in His graces."

I kept my smile frozen on my face. Italians were very religious, and I didn't think Mr. Marchetti appreciated being mocked.

"Your Nonno tells me you're taking over the DiMauro empire," Marchetti remarked, casually changing subjects. "And you're no longer a King."

Luca's hand gently rubbed my shoulder. Up and down. Up and down. The movement was comforting.

"That's right. My wife and I will go back to New York. I need to liquidate some businesses there and line up coverage. Then we'll be back here to live for most of the year."

"Wonderful." Marchetti smiled, a ruthlessly gorgeous smile. His eyes came back to me. "I am looking forward to meeting your daughter and watching her grow up."

His interest in my daughter threw me off. I tilted my head, studying him. He didn't look away, a smoldering challenge in his cool gaze full of determination.

"Enrico, thank you for putting in the word and supporting my wishes to see my nipote married in church." Nonno diplomatically eased the tension. "My Penelope and wife are happy up in heaven watching over them now."

"Of course, considering she was almost my mother," he mused. When I gave them a confused look, he explained. "My father and Nonno had the grand idea of tying our families together by having my father marry Penelope. Unfortunately, that never happened."

“It didn’t interrupt the peace we had going for decades though,” Nonno said, his cane knocking against the ground. “We will cement our long lasting relationship now.”

Mr. Marchetti nodded, then the two continued their discussion in Italian. With their attention away from us, Luca and I took a step back.

“What was that about?” I muttered under my breath, while keeping a smile plastered on my face. “Who is *he*?”

“Enrico Marchetti is a very prominent figure in Europe and in the world,” Luca said, not really explaining anything at all.

We went for another dance before being interrupted by a disturbance, from a little girl’s scream, in the far corner of the garden. Everyone’s eyes darted to the back corner where a fight seemed to have broken out.

A little girl hung on the back of one boy, her fists pounding on him.

“Let him be,” she screeched, her gold spun curls bouncing as she kept hitting him. “Get away from him or I’ll… I’ll bite you,” she warned, her eyes desperate on the four boys.

“It seems four boys have ganged up on one, and the girl decided to fight for the underdog,” Luca noted amused.

I grabbed his hand. “We have to help.”

Tugging him along, we rushed to the increasing audience surrounding the spectacle. By the time we muscled our way through the crowd, the fight had ended.

The little girl was held up in the air by her father. At least I assumed it was her father. She kicked, as if she wanted to go at the boy again. Her hair was wild, framing her heart shaped face and her hands were curled into little fists.

My lips curled into a smile. She couldn’t be older than five and she glared at the twelve-year-old boy, threatening him.

“You touch him again, Enzo, and I’ll bite your head off,” she growled.

“Basta,” her father growled. *Enough*. “Or you’ll be in timeout until you’re eighteen.”

She didn’t hear the threat, her eyes on the boy who stood up and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He kept a wary gaze on the boys who attacked him.

“The boy is impressive,” Luca murmured. “Four boys against one, and he’s less bruised up than all four of them combined.”

He was right. My eyes traveled over the boy with thick black hair that reflected a blue hue under the light of the sun. The boy was young, maybe eleven, but his prominent cheekbones and eyes darker than the night already hinted of a man who'd grow into someone that was bound to break women's hearts.

Whether he wanted to or not.

"They attacked Amadeo," the little girl hissed. "He was just talking to me and they came behind him and started the fight."

"Aria Elora Costello, I said *basta*." Her father's face turned dark. "Did your brother teach you to do that? To fight?" It was clear by the way she pressed her lips together, she wouldn't answer him. The old man sighed and lifted her up into his arms. "What am I going to do with you?" he sighed.

"It wasn't right," she murmured with a sorrowful expression.

Suddenly the crowd parted and Mr. Marchetti strode over. His eyes took in the situation, then turned to the boy little Aria bit and the boy that was attacked.

"Enzo, Amadeo," he started calmly, but there was a note of warning in his tone. "What happened here?"

Answers all came at the same time. From the boys, women, and men. Italian, English, and another language I didn't understand.

The only ones that said nothing were Aria and Amadeo.

The girl with wild curls spun of gold and light blue eyes locked eyes with Amadeo. Unspoken words passed between the two, her light clashing with his darkness.

And somehow I knew that his darkness loved her innocence.

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

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MARGARET

The honeymoon had officially started the moment we left the reception and boarded the luxury yacht. The term yacht didn't match this ship sporting three split levels and a pool. Tinted windows ran alongside the deck, hiding the inside from any eye.

"Just us on the boat?" I questioned Luca.

"Just us and the crew."

One of the crew members showed up at that moment, greeting us and taking our bags into the suite.

When he disappeared from view, I glanced at Luca. "Two bedrooms, right?"

We had our little interlude during our picnic, but I didn't want to rush into anything. We had time, and I wanted to take it slow.

He didn't answer. He just took my hand as the yacht slowly left the dock. "Let me show you around."

I grimaced. "I'm not exactly full of grace at this stage of my pregnancy."

"I'd never let you fall. I protect what's mine." His words were full of something dark and sinful, it had my insides shaking. This had to be my punishment for getting pregnant. My body reacted to Luca tenfold and it only took a mere glance from him for my panties to soak with the evidence of my desire.

Karma was a bitch. In my case, a wet panty kind of bitch.

We boarded the waiting luxury yacht in Sicily, and I had to remind myself to close my mouth because I stared left and right in wonder. I had

never seen so much luxury in my life, and it wasn’t as if I grew up in poverty.

The tour of the yacht lasted forever. At least it seemed that way. There were large living spaces on each deck. Lounges and lush cabins. A master suite with a jacuzzi and a glass bottom window to the ocean below. And let’s not forget the helipad.

“Whose yacht is this?” I asked him as we took our spots at the beach club area on the bottom deck.

My eyes locked on the horizon, the stretch of blue Ionian Sea breathtaking, with the salty breeze in our faces.

“Ours.”

“Hmmm.”

I closed my eyes, suddenly thinking back to the wedding and my curiosity about Marchetti and his relationship with my family. Luca’s reaction to him seemed off, almost protective, which was odd since it was obvious the DiMauros and Marchettis were close. But I needed to know if being in Sicily was going to be dangerous for my daughter and me. I wouldn’t be able to enjoy the honeymoon with that hanging over my head

“Are you feeling okay?” Luca touched my belly. For some reason, he seemed to love touching my belly. Strangely, I didn’t mind it. My chest fluttered each time he touched it, and the baby did extra somersaults.

It seemed little Penelope loved Luca’s touch too. I froze. Penelope? I lowered my eyes to my stomach and I knew, just knew deep down, this was the name for my little girl.

“What is it, Margaret?”

My eyes lifted to him and my lips curved into a smile. “Penelope,” I murmured. “I think that’s the right name.” Something flashed across Luca’s face, and I worried maybe he’d mind having a reminder of his mother. “Unless–”

“I love it,” he rasped. “Nonno might cry when he hears.”

I couldn’t help but smile. “We’ll have to tell him no crying, or we’ll change our minds.”

He smirked. “Nonno will make you promise in blood that the baby's name will be Penelope.”

“Luca?”

“Yes?”

“My brother said there is a vendetta between the Marchettis and Callahans. Is that true?” He nodded. “If that’s the case, I can’t stay here and put my baby at risk.”

“Our baby.”

I sighed. “Luca, you know what I mean.”

“You and the baby are part of the DiMauro family. You’ll always be protected. Your safety is my first priority.”

I believed him. God help me, I really believed him

WE’D BEEN FLOATING around this mansion on the water for the past forty-eight hours.

Luca insisted that I take the master suite on the yacht. I wouldn’t hear of it, so when it was bedtime, I snuck off to the first bedroom next to it and fell asleep. By unspoken agreement, all my stuff remained in the master suite.

I laid awake in the middle of the large bed, the sound of waves hitting the side of the boat soothing. Yet, I couldn’t find sleep. The stars glimmered like diamonds through the window, reflecting against the dark surface of the sea. Restlessness I hadn’t felt in a long time crawled up my spine, refusing to let me rest.

Turning to my other side, I pulled the blanket over me. My skin felt tight. The constant splash of the waves egged me on. It ridiculed the fact that I slept alone in my bed. On my honeymoon.

I slid off the bed in a huff. Glancing at the clock, I noted the time. It was eleven at night. Maybe Luca was still awake and he’d keep me company. Barefoot, I padded across the room and out into the hallway. Barely ten steps and I was in front of the master suite’s door.

I knocked softly against the door. No answer. Placing my hand on the door handle, I pushed on it and the door cracked open. It was then that I heard the constant splash of running water. My eyes shifted to the bathroom. The door was cracked open, the light spilling into the room.

“Luca?” I whispered.

No answer. I swallowed hard as my pulse sped up and my breath caught in my throat. I shouldn’t do it. It was clear that Luca was in the shower. Yet, my feet already moved of their own will.

He's your husband, my mind whispered. There was no harm done if I peeped on my husband.

"Margaret." A tortured groan. Luca's voice. An inferno burst through me at the sound of his voice.

I inched closer and closer to the bathroom door. Another soft groan. A rhythmic sound of flesh stroking flesh. The door drifted open and Luca came into full view.

My breath hitched and my insides clenched. Fire ignited in the pit of my stomach and a throbbing ache pulsed between my thighs.

I stared at his sculpted muscles of his back, the slick, glistening skin making me parched and only he could quench my thirst. His one hand braced against the shower wall, his bicep flexed. Back and forth. Up and down. His dark hair glistened with drops of water.

His movements were jerky, and I swore I felt them in my core. I clenched my thighs, ignoring the throbbing that urged me to join him.

My eyes roamed over his broad shoulders, down his back, his narrow torso and that ass. Jesus, it was wrong for a man to have such a gorgeous ass. His body flexed with each move, his hand gripping his cock as he fisted himself. Up and down.

He shifted a bit and I held my breath, worried I was caught. But he never glanced my way, now giving me the most magnificent profile view. His hips rocked faster and his fist pumped harder. I'd bet my life my husband fucked fast and rough. Mercilessly, rutting like a beast.

There wasn't a single thing about it that I didn't like.

Another grunt. His head tilted back, his eyes squeezing shut. His moans were raspy and hoarse, seducing me. Pulling me.

I couldn't stop watching him. My mouth was dry, my pulse rapid, and my breathing labored. My heart thundered under my ribs so hard, it threatened to crack them.

"Fuck, yes," he groaned, his bicep flexing. A soft whimper slipped through my lips at the same time as he rasped a rough, "Margaret."

Upon hearing my name, my mouth parted in shock. My body ignited like a volcano, and my pussy throbbed with an ache that I knew only he could sate.

He came with a guttural sound, setting every inch of my skin aflame.

Without making a sound, like a coward, I took a step back. And another. Then I rushed back to my bedroom.

As I crawled into the bed, images of my husband jacking off played on repeat.

It wasn't until I drifted off to sleep that I realized.

He had a piercing on his shaft.

WHEN I WOKE UP, we were in Greece. The water was sapphire blue and crystal clear. I could see the bottom everywhere I looked. Luca had some business to attend to so I finished breakfast, went for a swim, and then changed into a loose dress.

The weather had been cooperating since we left Sicily, and I took it as a good sign for the future.

I stared out into the distance, admiring the view. White-washed houses with blue roofs. Windmills. Mountains in the background. Patroklos Islands. Remains of the Temple of Poseidon.

"Are you hungry?"

My head whipped up, meeting Luca's eyes. Instantly, images of last night swarmed my mind and my cheeks flamed. Good God, I'd never seen anything sexier. Well, aside from my wild night in Vegas.

I shook my head, then lowered my eyes on my book, desperate to hide my embarrassment.

"Want to go explore this afternoon?"

I straightened up and my eyes searched his face. "The coastline?"

He chuckled. "Yes, the coastline."

"Yes, I would love to go explore."

"Then we shall explore."

Ten minutes later, I stood on the deck in a white dress, ready to get off this yacht. Luca was freshened up and showered. He looked like a million bucks dressed in white shorts and short-sleeve polo shirt the color of his eyes. Butterflies in my stomach fluttered and desire for my husband quivered between my thighs, but I ignored it.

"Ready?" he asked.

I nodded and he extended his hand. My face burned from the images of what that hand could do. My husband was a sight when he jerked off. But my name on his lips was what had undone me.

“Is everything alright?”

I shook my head, clearing out the images. “Yes, everything is perfect.”

I smiled and took his hand. You’d think we were a happy married couple, not two strangers that came to an agreement. He was helping me, and I was helping him.

Except, it felt like more. A lot more than just that.

The tender dropped us off at the shoreline and we started exploring. I had done my share of traveling with my parents, but I had never visited Greece. White-washed houses with blue shutters and roofs, shops, people… it was so much better than any travel commercial or postcard. We took our time exploring, window shopping, some stores we’d go in, others just passed them by.

“Do you like it?” Luca questioned. He pointed to a beautiful twenty-four carat gold necklace with a pendant of an ancient design that only this local shop crafted. Every store we went in, Luca wanted to buy me something, and I kept resisting. But this one, it captured me.

“It’s beautiful,” I told him. “But we’re just window shopping.”

“We’ll take it,” he told the shop owner.

“Luca, it’s too much,” I told him. Although my eyes kept returning to it. I had never seen anything like it. “Besides, I don’t even wear jewelry.”

Luca ignored my protests. He came up behind me, placed the necklace around my neck and kissed the back of my nape as he buckled it.

“Wear it for me.” As he whispered the words, his mouth moved along my skin, his hot breath on my neck sending shivers down my spine. “Please.”

His lips seared my skin, my heart raced, and desire ignited. Was it really so easy to lose your head for someone? Apparently so. All I had to do was witness my husband jerking off in the shower.

“Okay.” My agreement was breathless and my chest thumped with a strange emotion. “Thank you.”

Hand in hand, we got lost among the locals. The young locals didn’t spare us a second glance, but the older ones would stop us and chat with us like they’d known us for years. I honestly couldn’t remember the last time I had such a good time.

For the rest of the afternoon, my fingers kept reaching for the necklaces, checking to see if it was still there. And each time, my heart swelled.

This was easy falling.

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Chapter Twenty-Nine

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LUCA

Two weeks.

We'd been married for two weeks and we were both still alive. That was a good sign. Maybe the two of us had a future ahead of us.

In fact, if you asked me, they were the best weeks of my entire life.

Margaret and I had fallen into a routine. Things were good. But all along, in the back of my mind, a feeling lingered. Maybe it was paranoia. Or fear from losing her now that I had finally gotten her.

Truthfully, I didn't want to bring my wife back to New York. I wanted to leave her in Sicily with Nonno, but she wouldn't have it. People would wonder too. I wasn't the type to separate from what was mine.

And Margaret DiMauro was mine. She was mine in every way.

She had been since the moment I stabbed my father for her. To save her life. I never expected to see her again. She had never been in my plans.

Yet, I couldn't be happier that she snuck into Temptation all those years ago. She changed the entire course of my life.

She was the only thing worth having. She and our baby.

I had been diligently working at setting up what I needed to wash money from the business I would lead in Sicily. I didn't want any of that to touch my legitimate businesses, so it took longer than I liked.

But my wife didn't complain.

She took time to meet with Áine. They set up a shopping trip so she could get everything we needed for our little Penelope. She had protested that the black Amex card was too much, but I disagreed. Only the best for my little girl.

The best part of my days were dinners with my wife.

She preferred to stay home. Dinner and a movie, she'd say. She couldn't cook for shit so she'd order takeout, then after we ate, she'd drag me to the couch, put her feet on me and put an old movie on.

She'd get lost in the movie. And I? All I felt and smelled was her. I waited for her to be ready, to make the next move. I didn't want to push her, but there was no denying this sizzling attraction brewing between us.

When I stepped into the penthouse, the smell of roasted meat and rosemary wafted over my way.

"Honey, I'm home," I yelled, grinning like a fool. "Kitchen is still standing and something smells delicious."

My wife poked her head out of the kitchen doorway, a spatula in her hand.

"Finally," she beamed. "Come over here and get this goddamn pan out of the oven. I can't bend over with this giant belly."

I chuckled as she disappeared into the kitchen and I moved, following her.

When I entered, she exclaimed. "Tada."

The little table was set up with dishware I didn't know I had and two candles in the middle.

"Wow, looks romantic," I said with a smile. "You didn't have to work this hard to seduce me, wife. All I need is a kiss and I'm yours."

I reached for one of the roasted potato halves when she swatted my hand away.

"Wait until dinner," she scolded but her smile ruined it all.

Luckily, the potato was still in my hand, so I put it in my mouth. It was delicious.

"When did you learn how to cook?"

"Cooking show," she exclaimed. "Did you know there were cooking shows? Like real cooking shows. You can cook along with them!"

I chuckled. "I did."

Not that I'd seen many.

"Anyhow, it helped me get all this together. If you get the roast out, we can test it. I also ordered Chinese in case this fails."

Pressing a kiss to her cheek, I chuckled. "It smells delicious, so I think Chinese will be a no go. Now go sit down. I got it from here."

"Luca," she protested. "I'm the wife."

“And I’m the husband. This is a partnership, and I don’t want anything happening to my wife and unborn child.”

She got flustered and her cheeks turned a deep red. It happened every time I referred to the baby as mine. She was mine, but Margaret didn’t know it yet.

She sat down, and I carried the large serving tray with the roast, potatoes and peas. We dug in and either I was overly hungry or my wife got the cooking under control.

“This is good, wife,” I complimented her cooking. “Better than a restaurant.”

“Thank you.” She gave me that smile that had the power to bring me to my knees. “What’s your favorite dish? Maybe I’ll try that next.”

I resisted the urge to lift her and sit her on my lap. If temperamental Margaret was attractive, amiable Margaret was downright irresistible.

“Fix homemade ricotta raviolis and my heart is forever yours,” I told her amused at her enthusiasm.

She reached for her phone and typed something into it.

When I cocked my eyebrow, she explained, “I forget everything. I’m making note of it.”

Once satisfied, she put her phone away and returned her attention to me.

“How was your day?” she asked as she cut into her food. “Are you making headway with your businesses?”

I swallowed my food before answering. “Yes, slowly but surely. Are you missing Sicily?’

Her lips curved into a soft smile. “I am. And Nonno.”

I tilted my head thinking she was joking, but she looked serious.

“I can ask him if he’d be interested to visit us for a bit?” I offered.

She shook her head. “He loves it there so much,” she answered. “Don’t make him suffer through this metropolitan circus. Once we’re done here, we’ll be back there.”

“And how was your day?” I asked her. “Besides preparing this delicious meal.”

She shrugged. “It was okay. My brothers swung by for a quick visit.” She rolled her eyes, but her soft expression kind of ruined it. “They had to ensure this place was decent enough.”

A sardonic breath left me. “Did they find it lacking?”

“Tyran and Kyran objected to everything,” she admitted. “Aiden shut them down. He said security is top notch and the place is very nice. Besides, he seems to be the only one to acknowledge that we’ll be living in Sicily. The twins decided to ignore the whole thing all together. Aiden said they are not happy to have me living so far away.”

“They can come visit,” I assured her. When she gave me a dubious look, I continued. “I told you, Marchetti will not harm you nor your brothers.”

“But he’ll hurt Uncle?”

I shrugged. “I’m afraid Marchetti’s graces do not extend to your uncle. He killed his twin brother and that will remain a bitter pill until his dying breath.”

She sighed and returned to eating her food.

Once we finished, we cleaned up the table together. She rinsed the dishes, and I put them into the dishwasher. Like we’d done it a million times.

“I’m surprised you help with cleaning up,” she spoke up, leaning against the counter and wiping her hands, all the while watching me.

“My grandparents tag teamed in the kitchen,” I told her as I shut the dishwasher door. “It didn’t matter that he was the head of the Sicilian mafia. At home, he was a husband and father.”

I wrapped an arm around her waist and led her to the couch. It was too early for bed. Her cheeks were flushed as I dipped my head. “I plan on following in the footsteps of Nonno.”

Grabbing the remote, I sat on the couch and she followed suit, then kicked off her shoes and I lifted her legs, placing them across my lap.

She let out a sigh the moment my fingers wrapped around her swollen ankle. I turned the television on, and it defaulted to the last channel watched. The TCM channel that played old movies.

Aubrey Hepburn’s face filled the screen. *Roman Holiday* played.

“Ah, I love this movie,” she admitted, her eyes on the screen.

I chuckled. “I know, you’ve only watched it ten times or so since we got married.” She grinned, twisting her ankle. Stretching her legs. “Does it hurt?” I asked her.

She shook her head. “More of an inconvenience,” she murmured, closing her eyes.

Touching her was torturous and a delight at the same time. If touching my wife’s swollen ankles gave me a hard-on, I was so far gone there was no

chance of ever coming back. But if this was what she was willing to offer for now, I'd take it.

"God, you're good with your hands," she whispered.

Her eyes shot open at the realization of how those words sounded.

"Thank you, bella. That's good to hear." I smiled smugly. "Honestly, I was quite disappointed you hadn't come to see me in my room since the honeymoon."

I felt her body stiffen, but she didn't look away. No, not Margaret. Her gaze met mine head on.

"I didn't realize you knew," she remarked as I continued massaging her ankles.

"It comes with the profession," I said. "Or I'd be dead many times over."

She chuckled. "You think I want you dead?"

"Well, you did shoot me once," I reminded her.

Throwing her head back, she laughed, and I couldn't help but grin.

"Not to worry, Luca. I don't want to lose your hands, so I won't be shooting you again."

I dipped my head. "That is good to know, Wife. Now, tell me. Did you like watching me jerk off?"

Margaret's cheeks flushed crimson, and I could see her nipples perk through the thin material of her dress.

"It was pretty hot," she admitted, surprising me. Just when I thought she couldn't. "Did you know there are sex clubs where you can go watch people have sex and stuff?"

"I did," I told her, keeping my voice even. "Have you been to one before?"

Jealousy slithered through my veins like poison.

"No." She sighed, returning her attention back to the screen. For a few minutes, she remained quiet. "Have you?"

"I have," I admitted. She straightened up. "Before you get all worked up, it was only in passing."

"Where?" she demanded to know.

"There is one exclusive club here in the city," I said. "It is by invitation only. The Euphoria Vault."

Her eyes widened. "Oh my gosh. Really? Attending that club at least once is on my bucket list." That was the last thing I expected to come out of

her mouth. “What?” she asked defensively. “Tell me you don’t have a bucket list.”

I studied her.

“I’m more interested in what else is on your bucket list,” I mused.

She leaned back into the couch. “I’ll tell you if you start massaging my ankles again.”

My eyes lowered and I realized my fingers gripped her ankle, no longer massaging it. I restarted the circular movements, massaging her feet, her sparkly red toes and then back to her ankles.

“I’m waiting,” I reminded her. She looked at me with a raised brow. “For the remainder of your bucket list,” I clarified.

“Rome was on my bucket list,” she answered. “But I’ve seen it. Sex club. Learn to play chess. See the Northern Lights.” She took a deep breath, then exhaled. “There is more, but I can’t remember at this moment.”

Silence followed. It didn’t take long for her eyes to droop and fall asleep with *Roman Holiday* playing in the background and my brain vigorously working at making her bucket list happen.

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Chapter Thirty

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MARGARET

Father's laughter died.

The foyer felt ominous and dark. Except that rays of sunshine poured through the windows. It didn't look any different than usual. But then it did. When we stepped into it.

Foreboding squeezed my chest. The day had started so well. Da came and picked me up early from school. He said it was our special time, and we'd have ice cream. We'd spend the day alone. Just him and I.

Sometimes Da didn't look happy in our home. He always seemed happy in Uncle Jack's home, but Mother hated it there.

I dropped my school backpack on the ground and waited. Usually my brothers tackled me. Or my mother scolded me.

Yet, none of it happened today. No mother. No brothers. Just a quiet house. But there was a strange car outside. I knew Da noticed it too.

I glanced at my dad. "Where is everyone, Da?" I questioned.

His brows were furrowed and his expression tight. He was alert, keeping me right next to him.

"Remember, love. Your brothers are at camp," he said in a calm voice. Yet, it didn't match his expression. Something was wrong. "It will be just the three of us. We'll do something special."

"I forgot," I grumbled. "I'm gonna miss them."

The twins and Aiden were super smart and Da sent them to a camp for whiz kids. I let out a heavy sigh. I wished I could have gone with them. I wanted to be smart like them

Father’s big hand came to my head and he pulled on my pigtail. “I know, but they’ll be home soon.”

Glass shattering startled both of us.

My steps were already moving, running when my father’s arms caught me around my waist. He shook his head, his grip on me tight.

“Go outside, Margaret,” he ordered in a hushed tone. “And hide.”

My heart beat fast, hurting my chest.

“Who’s here, Da?” I whispered.

He grabbed my arm and pushed me towards the door, roughly. And Da was never rough with me, only with the boys.

“Go hide,” he hissed in a low voice. “Now.”

Obeying him, I rushed to the door we’d just come through and my steps faltered. I was scared for him. What if he needed my help?

I looked over my shoulder just in time to see Da pull out a gun, then slowly climb the stairs. He kept his steps silent, creeping up. I’d seen guns my whole life, but I’d never seen Da hold one and certainly not use it. The sight of the cold metal had my throat turning dry and my blood running cold.

Remaining glued to my spot, I watched my father’s shadow get further and further from me. Blood roared in my ears and my heart thundered so hard, it hurt. I muttered distorted words of a prayer that Aiden had taught me. I only made it to the end of the first verse when father stopped, then reared back a step.

“What the–" I could still see him hold his gun as he stretched out his arm. But he wasn’t shooting.

Why wasn’t he shooting if there was a bad guy?

Bang. Bang. Bang.

My father’s body tumbled down the stairs and a scream tore from my lips. Thud. Thud. Thud. It went on and on, Father's big, strong body rolled down the steps forever when in fact it had to be just a few seconds.

He landed on his back, two bullets in his chest and one in his throat.

I stared frozen at the bloodstain blossoming on Da’s chest. Blood quickly pooled around him like a red sea.

He gasped, his eyes on me. Horror. Terror. Fear. I watched my Da’s strong body struggle to move, when steps thudded on the marble floor. Thud. Thud. Thud.

Every sound dulled under the buzzing in my ears.

“R-run,” he gurgled. He fought to live. Struggled to lift himself up, but his body was too weak. Then his frame fell back and I watched the life fade from his eyes.

My blood roared. Liquid dripped down my fingers, and my eyes lowered to find that I dug my nails into my palms so hard I was bleeding.

A pair of black boots kicked at my father’s dead corpse.

“Good riddance,” the old man sneered.

It was then that I finally awoke from my stupor. I shifted around to run but it was too late. A hand wrapped around my neck.

“Where are you running to, little girl?” he purred, lifting me up into the air. My fingers clawed at his wrist. I gasped for air as he carried me, my feet dangling off the ground. My father’s body was right underneath me. I wanted to hug him. I wanted to save him. But he was gone.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

A cold blade pressed against my throat.

I kicked and clawed. It was then I caught a glimpse of my mother. Her face was smeared with blood, tears, and makeup. She was in a nightgown. It was the middle of the day. Why was she in a nightgown?

“Mamma,” I choked out, every syllable hurting my throat. She didn’t move.

My vision dimmed. My consciousness slipped. A loud roar broke through the haze in my brain. My body jerked.

Falling. Falling. Fallen.

My head hit the hard marble floor and the world went dark.

I woke up with a start, the silky sheets sticking to my sweaty skin. Terror spun its web through every inch of my body. Catching my breath, I stared at the ceiling of Luca’s penthouse. The dream always came back at random times. There was something in it I was missing, but I couldn’t pinpoint what.

The memory hurt. The revelation didn’t surprise me, but it still hurt. My mother didn’t protect me. She didn’t care about Da. She only cared about herself.

The penthouse was covered in darkness. Just like my dreams. The nightmare I didn’t like to remember.

Glancing at the clock, I noted it was only eleven at night. It was quiet. Way too quiet. Luca usually had the television on either in the living room or his bedroom.

For noise, he said.

A tiny flash of disappointment flared in my chest. Was he having a night out with another woman? No cheating was a condition of our agreement, but maybe he got tired of waiting for me. It was only now that I realized how much fidelity in our marriage meant to me.

Restless energy coursed through my veins. Decidedly trying to shut my mind down, I turned to my side and stared out of the large window, the city skyline flickering with lights. I had lived in New York my entire life, yet nothing had ever felt as good as Sicily.

Suddenly, I missed quiet nights there. I missed dark streets and the distant sound of the waves crashing against the shoreline. Even the language that I didn't understand. It was more soothing than the constant buzzing of this metropolitan city.

After an hour of tossing and turning, I gave up on sleep. Luca was on my mind and there'd be no finding rest. Not until I got him out of my mind.

With an exasperated sigh, I threw off the blankets and slid out of bed. Grabbing the nightgown, I put it on and padded down the dark halls to the kitchen. The moonlight spilled through the floor-to-ceiling windows and lit the gray and white cabinets. I opened the refrigerator and grabbed the milk container.

Luca insisted on getting organic and unpasteurized milk for me to drink. As I poured it into a glass, my lips curved into a soft smile thinking about his thoughtfulness. I never imagined I'd get here with the son of Benito King.

Once I downed it, I rinsed the glass out in the sink. As I bent over to put the glass into the dishwasher, I noticed the faint glow coming from Luca's bedroom from the opposite hallway. When we arrived, he insisted our bedrooms be on the opposite sides of his penthouse, claiming he was often up late into the night and didn't want to wake me.

I didn't think anything of it. But now, hesitancy slithered through my veins. What if he had insisted on that so he could have another woman in his bed and then slip her out the door before I ever woke up?

A faint moan rang in the air.

My body went white-hot then froze as I realized what could be happening behind that door. Fury rippled through me like a tropical cyclone, ripping the faint threads that started forming between us.

I blinked hard, my throat tightening.

It was hard to understand this reaction. All my walls seemed to crumble around this man and that made him even more threatening to me.

Glutton for punishment, I padded down the hallway. My steps were silent, just like Da's were all those years ago. Insecurity had my steps faltering right at his bedroom door. The dream was still fresh in my mind, weakening my resolve.

I braced myself on the doorframe, the dream kept sweeping me away to that day. The day I lost my father. I gripped the frame of the door, determined to push the memories away, and just as I leaned against it, the door drifted ajar. Just enough to see Luca's shadow in the middle of his king size bed.

My breath caught. My husband was in the middle of his bed totally naked. And alone.

On the nightstand next to him, a glass with ice and brownish liquid sat. A whiskey if I had to guess. And next to it was a tube of lube, the cap open.

My heart fluttered. My thighs clenched with need. And my mind whispered of pleasure I could get if only I'd cave in.

He is your husband after all, the devil on my shoulder whispered. God, this man would be my ruin.

My eyes roamed over his strong, naked body. He was beautiful. A masterpiece. His olive skin glimmered like bronze, marred with ink. His torso was covered in tattoos. Madonna. A heart, an actual heart with a rose. A cross on one of his pecs. My fingertips buzzed with the need to touch him. God, I'd give just about anything right now to touch him.

Instead, I had to settle for watching his own strong hand wrapped around his big, thick cock. His hands threaded with veins jacked off, up and down. My mouth parted and my breath hitched while my heart thundered against my ribs.

And the piercing.

How many men actually did that to their dicks? I wondered.

His big body was sprawled in the bed, his upper torso propped against pillows and his thickly muscled thighs spread wide. While his hand pulled hard up and down at his shaft, his other hand cupped his sack.

He looked magnificent as he jerked off. Like an erotic god. His head was thrown back against the pillows, neck corded with tension. There was rugged masculinity about him. Rough, yet so fucking erotic that it had me

shuddering with desire. My own arousal seeped into my silky panties, ruining them and trickling down the inside of my thighs.

I'd been blaming my hormones for my reaction to this exquisite man; although if I was completely frank with myself, I'd been lying to myself. I couldn't tear my gaze from him, imagining it was my hand on his long cock. Imagining it was me bringing him to the edge. I wished I could taste him. See him up-close. I wanted to see every inch of him, every tattoo, every vein, every freckle.

When he hissed, his gaze lowering down to his thick fingers pulling up his shaft, my mouth dried. I forgot to breathe. I couldn't remember how to swallow and a soft gasp slipped through my lips.

His eyes shot to me. Our gazes clashed. My reason screamed to back away, go back to my room. But his eyes held me glued to the spot. Something hot and dark burned in that gaze.

There was nothing soft about Luca DiMauro. Every inch of him was hard. His soul. His body. His cock. Yet, when he looked at me, there was something dark and tender behind his eyes. For me.

I didn't know how I knew it but I did. Deep down in my soul, I knew it even if I couldn't admit it.

He shifted on the bed, giving me a better glimpse of his cock. He wrapped his palm around his swollen shaft and a moan vibrated through the room. His. Mine. Ours.

The head of his thick shaft was swollen and purple. I couldn't see the tip of it but I could practically taste his pre-cum. His cock twitched under my gaze, spitting precum.

Jesus, I was tempted to find a chair and touch myself as I watched him. That might be the most exciting erotic experience since Vegas.

My hand came to my belly, rubbing it absentmindedly.

"Margaret." His voice was hoarse. Raspy. Tortured. "Just say the word and I'll make you come."

He never stopped jacking off, my eyes following the movement as his hand moved along his length. My skin pulled tight. My body burned. My skin flushed. I wanted to come. But I didn't want to venture into these dangerous waters with him.

Not with our temporary arrangement.

But maybe I didn't have to deny myself pleasure as I touched myself? He was doing it. He seemed to like me watching him. God, I'd like him

watching me.

“Margaret,” he rasped in a guttural voice. All those tense muscles clenched and twitched as pleasure worked through him. He worked himself faster and harder, fucking into his fist.

“Say it,” he demanded harshly.

I shook my head, my tongue darting over my lips. I was parched. But no amount of liquid would quench this thirst. It was for something only he could give me.

“I can touch myself,” I said stubbornly. My voice sounded distant to my own ears, my brain flooded with a haze of lust. We both knew his touch would feel better, but I worried about crossing that line. “While you watch.”

He stilled his movements. “Say that again,” he rasped.

I gulped. There was still time to bolt. Yet the devil wouldn’t let me. I wanted this. The excitement. The idea of him watching me as I orgasmed had my insides quivering with anticipation.

“I can touch myself as you watch,” I breathed. “And I can watch you.”

A heartbeat passed.

“Sit down over there,” he ordered roughly, tilting his chin toward the lounge chair on the opposite side of the room. “I can’t trust myself if you’re within my reach.”

My mouth formed a silent O.

My feet silent against his plush rug, I made my way to the chair. Before I had a chance to sit down, his words stopped me.

“Lose the robe,” he rasped. I obeyed without delay. Then his next command came. “Lift your baby doll nightgown and pool it around your waist.”

“Why?” I breathed. “It’s sheer. You can see through it.”

He’d know. He insisted on buying it.

“I don’t want anything obstructing my view of your beautiful body.”

Tremors rolled through me and my hands shook slightly as I followed his instruction. “Now your panties. Take them off.”

Hesitancy slithered through me. It was ridiculous. He’d seen me in nothing but a bath towel. He rubbed my back when it ached. Yet, this was different. Suddenly, I was self-conscious about my softer thighs and bigger ass. Not to mention my big belly nurturing life inside me.

“Now, Margaret,” he grunted, his self-restraint evident in his voice. “I want to see your beautiful pink pussy as I jerk off.”

Well, when he said it that way. I shimmied off my panties, letting them slide down my legs then kicked them off.

I sat down and parted my legs, my pussy within my husband's full view. A shudder rolled down my spine. This felt forbidden. So freaking erotic. So *Basic Instinct* except on a pregnant level.

His grip on his length tightened and my pussy clenched in response.

"You're so fucking beautiful," he praised in a raspy voice. A knot in my chest loosened and air I wasn't aware I was holding swished out of my lungs. "Touch yourself, *mia moglie*."

My hand slid between my thighs to stroke my clit and my eyelids fluttered shut. It felt so good to touch myself knowing he was watching me. My heart thundered under my rib cage and fire burned in my veins.

"Open your eyes."

I forced them open, watching him through my lust-filled gaze. Our eyes locked, my finger brushed against my nub, circling it with wetness. A loud moan escaped me.

"That's right, keep doing it," he instructed hoarsely. "Finger yourself as I jerk off, imagining your tight hot pussy around my cock."

"Luca." His name was a breathless whisper on my lips as I fingered myself.

The pressure built, taking me higher and higher. I watched him squeeze his cock tightly, almost violently each time he passed over the crown. His eyes were hungry on my pussy and mine soaked him in as he pumped his cock. Up and down.

My insides clenched as I imagined him deep inside me. He must have had similar thoughts because his muscles clenched and twitched as pleasure worked through him. He fucked his fist with long brutal strokes. I matched mine to his rhythm, pushing my fingers inside me.

A hiss escaped through his clenched teeth. "Are you imagining my cock inside you?"

"Oh my God," I moaned, the throbbing pulse between my thighs unbearable. I fingered my clit faster and harder, matching his own brutal strokes. Nothing mattered in this moment but his pleasure and mine.

"I'm going to be inside you," he murmured, watching me through his half-lidded gaze. "One day."

I couldn't think of a response through my lust hazed brain. I was in the fog and the only thing I cared about was chasing the orgasm. It was just the

two of us on the opposite side of the room. His gaze touched my skin and lit it up with sparks.

Our groans and moans filled the space. Our arousal fragranced the air. I wondered what his cum would taste like. Salty or musky. Or possibly sweet. I wanted to feel him inside me. It was on the tip of my tongue to beg him, but I held the words back.

My eyes lowered down his body to where his hand pumped his cock hard. I kept fingering my clit, as I imagined his big, thick shaft inside my pussy. He jacked off his shaft in time with my panting breaths. Our separate arousals created such wet, dirty sounds but it didn't match the filthy images in my mind.

My panting breaths. His ragged ones.

I sucked a sharp breath through my teeth when his neck strained, his tempo became erratic. I could feel it in my core as if he was fucking me. Pressure built higher and higher.

Then my body exploded into a million pieces. His breathing went harsh. He called out, "Margaret!" a second before he climaxed, cum spurting out of him all over his rock-hard stomach.

I pushed a finger inside me, my eyes locked on the glorious sight of seeing Luca orgasm. My pussy throbbed, my finger a poor substitute for what I knew his cock would feel like.

But this was the best orgasm I'd had since Italy.

He kept milking his cock, his grunting sounds and my whimpers mixing together. He kept coming, his cum dripping down his cock, his fingers, down his thighs. I licked my lips, wishing I could taste him.

All I had to do was stand up and walk over to him. He'd let me. I knew it as well as I knew my name. I watched him still hold his softening cock and still found the sight of him and all that seed deeply erotic.

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Chapter Thirty-One

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LUCA

My gaze was glued on Margaret's glistening pink pussy as I listened to her breathing.

I had never, fucking never, seen a more beautiful woman. Her swollen belly with our child was the most breathtaking sight. Fuck Himalayas. Fuck Sahara Desert. Or any amazing wonders of the world.

This was the only sight that took my breath away. And seeing her flushed, touching herself and thinking about me was the next best thing to touching her, so I'd take it.

Her eyes were still glued to my cock and her skin flushed. It took all my self-control to keep enough sense and shield my Prince Albert piercing. It was too soon to reveal to her that it was me who she took to bed in Vegas.

She removed her fingers from her pussy. "Don't move," I ordered her and her hand froze in midair.

I quickly slid out of bed, reached for a towel and cleaned myself up while keeping my eyes on her and ensuring my back was to her. Then I pulled up my sweatpants and walked over to her.

I took her hand and held her ocean gaze.

"I want to taste your fingers."

Shock entered her expression. Her mouth parted and her cheeks flushed a deeper shade of red. She was a siren, tempting me with every breath. My fingers wrapped around her dainty wrist and brought it to my mouth. I sucked her fingers clean, one by one, savoring the taste of her arousal.

"You taste like my woman," I groaned. "Like my wife."

She tugged on her hand, and I let her pull away. Although I regretted the loss already.

My childhood was harsh and ruthless under my father's thumb. But suddenly I couldn't regret it because it all led me to her. It was the image of the little girl with ebony black curls and soul shattering blue eyes that kept me going.

It wasn't until I ran into her in Temptation that I finally saw my purpose plain as day.

Margaret pushed her nightgown down, then lowered her eyes, letting them roam the room as if she couldn't wait to get away from here. Or couldn't stand to look at me.

"Look at me." She refused. Not surprising considering she found a way to contradict me at every turn. I took her chin between my fingers and forced her face up. The image of her, on her knees, looking up at me with those beautiful, heartbreaker eyes and my cock between her beautiful full lips flashed in my mind.

It sent a new wave of heat to my groin and made my blood rush in my ears.

Cristo santo.

I had just jacked off and spilled all over myself like some teenage boy, and suddenly, I was ready for another round.

"What's the matter?" I asked her, pushing my carnal urges aside. There'd be time for that. When she asked me for it.

"Nothing." Her response was soft, contradictory to her normal fire. It wasn't as if I minded it, but I wanted the real her.

I lowered to my knees. "What is it?"

Something flashed in her eyes and she reached for her panties, but I was quicker.

"Don't bend over with your belly." I read it was bad for her to put any pressure on her belly. Sleeping on her stomach was out of the question. Bending over while sitting and pushing her belly against her knees was bad too.

She rolled her eyes and extended her hand.

"No, I think I'll keep those. As a souvenir." I grinned. She blinked her eyes in confusion. "I enjoyed tonight, but if you refuse to do it again, your panties are the next best thing."

Besides, she seemed to be immune to my charms. After I ate her pussy back in the field, on the picnic blanket, I expected her to search me out. For her resolve to weaken. But no, she held steady. My wife was a stubborn woman.

“Or we can make our bedroom dates more frequent,” I suggested. Her cheeks turned crimson and a blush spread down her neck. Fuck, I loved riling her up, so I continued, “I’ll need your panties to wrap around my cock and jerk off next time. Unless you’d like to volunteer.”

She sighed and stood up. “This doesn’t change the fact that this marriage is not real. Let’s not get too crazy. We are just satisfying our… impulses… needs…” She cleared her throat. “Something.”

Then she left me on my knees, watching her walk away in that sheer white pregnancy lingerie.

“This is real, Wife,” I murmured softly, wishing she’d acknowledge this attraction between us. It was there from the moment we met. I knew it. She knew it but refused to admit it.

This marriage would be forever.

Until death do us part.

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Chapter Thirty-Two

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MARGARET

My nightmare was replaced with something else. Something hotter.

After I escaped temptation in the form of my husband, I wandered back to my bed on wobbly legs, my thighs clenching with need.

I'd like to think I was slowly dilating in preparation for my upcoming birth since I was a little over a month away from full term but I knew better.

The truth was that I wanted him more than I'd ever wanted anything. Years of circling each other had led us here. In the same penthouse. Married. Not quite in the same bed -- yet.

I'd started to think it was only a matter of time.

That night, the last thought before I fell asleep was of Luca in the shower. In the bed. Even in that Vegas hotel room. The masked man from Vegas whispered raspy words as he thrust in and out of me, calling me *mia bella.*

I stood naked in front of him in nothing but silk panties and cherry red pumps. His dick twitched, filling the front of his pants in what had to be painful proportions.

Jesus, he had to be huge.

My nipples tightened, aching for his touch.

My chest rose and fell. My soft breaths were the only sound filling the air. Still, I kept my eyes on his, determined to see every inch of him. I just wished the stupid masks weren't in the way.

He watched me with reverence. Something resembling possession passed his expression, but I couldn't be sure.

"Your turn," I breathed, releasing a shuddering breath.

I watched as he shed the suit jacket, then unbuttoned his black dress shirt, and all the while my eyes were zeroed in on his dick. While he removed the shirt, then his shoes, socks, and pants, I started to kick off my heels so that I could shimmy out of my panties.

We were doing this. And I couldn't wait.

"The masks stay on," I murmured as he hooked his strong fingers to pull down his boxers.

"Your heels stay on," he demanded, his voice hoarse. Our eyes locked. My pulse raced. His voice made me ache, soaking my panties. I nodded, and he discarded his boxers.

Frozen, I stared at his cock. He was big, but it wasn't that which had my heart fluttering widely.

"W-what's that?" I asked, my tongue sweeping over my bottom lip.

He wrapped his hand around his shaft and stroked it once. I could feel the blush staining my cheeks, though I wasn't sure if it was embarrassment or lust causing it.

By the ache throbbing between my thighs, it was definitely lust.

"This?" he asked, sweeping his thumb over the tip of his cock. "It's a piercing."

Heat shot straight to my core and I took a big gulp of air, trying to steady my reaction.

"You're huge," I whispered. I wasn't sure that I'd be able to handle something so massive my first time. Massive and – adorned "Why do you have a piercing too?"

I unconsciously reached out and instantly his hard cock twitched, eager for my touch. Coming to my senses, I quickly put my hand back down but couldn't stop rubbing my thighs together like I was in heat.

He inhaled a heavy breath, then closed his eyes as if he was smelling my arousal. Good God, at this rate, I'd orgasm before he even touched me.

"It feels good against your clit, and when I'm inside you, against your G-spot." His fingers wrapped around his cock, he tugged up and down, the piercing moving.

"Oh my God! Are you serious?"

He nodded, pre-cum already glistening at the tip of his cock.

"You ready to test it?" he challenged.

I had one last moment of sanity before I became resolute. I ***was*** *doing this.*

“Yeah,” I finally answered.

He took my hand to lead me to the bed, but I was going to make the first move. I wrapped my arms around his neck the minute my knees hit the mattress and fused my mouth to his. God, he tasted good. Like whiskey, sin, and bad decisions.

And still I refused to stop. His hand came around my nape, holding me as he kissed me. Hard. Wet. Possessive. I moaned, trailing my hand down his muscular chest. Lower and lower. His warmth seeped into me and when I wrapped my fingers around his hard cock, a shudder rolled over me.

Everything about this man was pure sex. A single touch by him made me feel more alive than anything I had ever experienced before.

He nudged me backwards and both of us fell back, the mattress bouncing our bodies and dipping under our weight. His body over mine, he rubbed his shaft against my wet folds and my back arched at the delicious feel of it.

“Jesus, I can feel the cold metal,” I panted.

He was about to slam into me when I remembered that I wasn’t on birth control. I also didn’t want the risk of any STDs. I was determined, not stupid. “Condom,” I breathed. “Don’t forget the condom.”

With a grunt, he got off the bed, found his wallet in his pants, and pulled one out. Ripping the package open with his teeth, he handed it to me so I could roll it onto his length. Once I had it on, I took his cock and poised it at my entrance and took a steadying breath.

“Okay, I’m ready,” I whimpered, my hands clutching his shoulders.

Without delay, he pushed into me in one forceful thrust and wedged himself deeply inside of me. The pain was excruciating and I choked. I knew it was going to be painful the first time but Jesus!

“Holy fuck,” he hissed.

He pulled out, almost completely, leaving only the tip inside before slamming back into me with a guttural groan. Again and again, like he was possessed. His muscled chest was coated with a sheen of sweat, making his ink appear vibrant, but I was unable to make them out with the mask on and in the darkness.

I panted, my thighs quivering as I tried to adjust. His fingers gripped my thighs, probably leaving marks but I didn’t care. This felt good. Pain and pleasure mixing.

I thought he said something, but I was too far gone to understand any words. All I heard was the warmth in his voice, which soothed the sting and filled my stomach with heat. One of his hands slipped between us, tracing my stomach down to my pussy until he brushed his fingers over my clit. I moaned. He rubbed it in a circular motion, the slick juices smearing.

He filled every inch of me, and the feeling of him inside me was so intense, I trembled. My moans and his grunts mixed, making erotic sounds.

"Oh. My. God." I moaned as the pain gave way to pleasure. Amazing pleasure. Earth shattering pleasure.

As he continued to rut into me, my eyes lowered, watching his shaft disappear into my pussy, and I loved the sight. Hovering above me, his pubic bone ground against my clit, sending the most indescribable tingles through me.

"Your pussy is taking me so well," he praised.

I could no longer keep my eyes open, the feeling he was creating too intense.

"Yes," I moaned. My fingers clawed at his back as he pumped into me like a mad man. Each thrust harder and deeper than the one before. The wet sounds of our bodies, flesh against flesh, our moans and grunts filled the room and bounced off the walls.

"God. Please," I screamed as he drove me closer to my first orgasm with a man. God, my vibrator will never feel the same after this.

My feet, with heels still on, wrapped around his waist, my fingers at his back, anchoring him to me as he pushed me closer to the orgasm. The feeling of him was everywhere.

My pussy clenched around him, about to explode. I was moaning senseless words as our bodies dripped with sweat. With a grunt, he brutally plunged into me one last time.

Mercilessly.

It felt like the tip of his cock and that damn piercing was reaching into my womb and that was it.

I detonated, shuddering and quivering around him. A wave of heat exploded under my skin and had me screaming as spots flew behind my eyes and I thought I'd faint.

It was as if I had left my body with the intensity of the orgasm he gave me. Moans and whimpers spilled from my lips uncontrollably as my pussy clamped down on his dick, pulsing in wave after wave.

He came hard, with a groan. His eyes, visible through the mask, rolled back in obvious ecstasy.

My eyes shot open and I was on my side on the bed, my thighs slick with my juices and my fingers inside my panties, thrusting in and out of my soaked pussy. My other hand was on my breast, pinching my nipple.

With horror, I sat up, removing my hands from my body. The scent of my arousal fragranced the air. My eyes were still full of sleep but the images in my mind couldn't have been clearer. The piercing. The tattoos.

How in the hell hadn't I seen it sooner? I should have recognized him. Oh my gosh.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid," I murmured as I jumped out of bed. Okay, jumping might have been a stretch. I wobbled out of the bed and stormed through the penthouse. I found him in his walk-in closet, looking gorgeous in one of his designer three-piece suits.

Damn him.

Why couldn't I find him wearing baggy jeans and an ugly loud orange shirt. Although, I wasn't sure that would make him any less attractive.

"Good morning, mia bella."

That was all I needed to hear for my fury to turn up a notch.

"You," I hissed, striding closer to him and poking him in the chest. "You."

He cocked his eyebrow, completely unperturbed.

"Yes, it's me." His voice was relaxed, the smirk on his handsome face pissing me off even more.

"You tricked me. I'm furious with you."

"Why?" He honestly looked surprised and insecurity found its way into my chest.

I shook my head. It had to be his tactic.

"It was you in Vegas," I accused, pushing my finger harder into his chest. "Don't bother denying it. I know. The tattoos. That fucking piercing. I can't believe I was so stupid not to see it sooner."

The words barely left my mouth when he put one hand behind my head and the other on my hip. He surrounded me. His scent drowned my fury and fed my hormones.

Fucking hormones,

As if he could read my thoughts, his nostrils flared as he stared down at me.

“You’re not stupid and you are mine,” he growled.

“You tricked me. You seduced me,” I accused. “You got me pregnant.”

“You are right, I tricked you. But you came right to me and dragged me upstairs. So technically you seduced me.”

My mouth dropped open and I stared at him in shock. I mean, he had a point, but fuck if I’d ever admit it.

“You should have told me. You knocked me up.” It was the only thing I had left. “At least when you found out about the pregnancy, you should have said something.”

“And you would have welcomed me with open arms, right?” The sarcasm in his voice didn’t escape me.

“You should have told me that night in Vegas,” I scolded.

“You were a willing participant, Margaret,” he remarked dryly.

“Sex is one thing, Luca,” I growled. “But getting me knocked up and then not saying a goddamn thing is quite another.”

He smiled proudly. “I couldn’t be happier to have a baby girl with you.”

“You could at least apologize,” I recoiled.

“No.” Before I could say another thing, he continued, “I will never apologize for having a baby with you. She is ours. Our past. Our present. Our future. And I will never apologize for wanting you. You want the truth? The day you ran into me in Temptation was the best day of my life. The day I found you again was the day I started to breathe.”

Those words caused my heart to skip and the backs of my eyes to burn. He sounded so sincere. Then the last sentence registered.

“What do you mean you found me again?” I narrowed my eyes on him suspiciously. It was hard to understand the inner workings of Luca’s brain. “Temptation was the first time we met. And then you kept stalking me.”

Something passed his expression but he quickly masked it.

“I meant again in Vegas,” he explained. It still made no sense to me. “Don’t ask me to regret it,” he said stubbornly. My eyes lowered. I didn’t want to see that dark possessive look in his gaze. I realized I still wore my nightgown from last night. Suddenly, I felt even more naked next to him in a three-piece-suit. “Penelope and you are the best things that have ever happened to me. So no, I won’t regret it.”

I sighed. It was hard to be pissed off at him when he looked at me like that, more so when he spoke about our unborn child like that. No wonder he insisted on claiming her as his. Because she was his.

“Was it on purpose?” I asked. “Did you get me pregnant on purpose?”

The lines around his eyes deepened and I knew the answer before he opened his mouth.

“You’ve been mine for a long time, mia bella.” His voice was possessive and unapologetic. He should feign it at the minimum, I thought irritably. “Obviously, I couldn’t control whether you got pregnant or not. Nor whether the condom would break. But I made sure to increase the odds of it.”

I shook my head.

“That is so wrong,” I muttered.

His thumb rubbed back and forth across my neck, sending tingles down my spine and my body betrayed me. A visible shiver rolled down my body.

“I’m sorry I deceived you, but I’m not sorry where it got us.”

I closed my eyes. His response didn’t surprise me. My anger already melted, but I wasn’t willing to let him see it. Instead, I clung to my dignity and a fragment of my feminism. Of course, my hormones refused to cooperate but that was a separate issue.

His lips reached my ear. “Forgive me, mia bella moglie. Let me fuck you. Or at least, let me make you feel good. My balls ache for you.”

Jesus, that escalated quickly. The walls of my pussy contracted, greedy for his cock. Now that it connected my husband to my mysterious masked man, the greedy bitch wanted more of his big cock.

I took a step back. I couldn’t cave to him. At least not yet.

He must have seen something in my eyes and his expression darkened.

“I’m not letting you go,” he warned, his voice low and even. The statement lingered in the air, filling the space between us. The disturbing part was that I was relieved. Not knowing the baby's father’s identity bothered me, though I’d have never admitted it to save my life. “Penelope and you are my family, and I protect what’s mine.”

I didn’t know why I found it so hot, but I did. I swallowed hard, trying to hide the impact his words had on me.

“How many women have you had?” I asked him, changing subjects.

“Too many,” he admitted. That didn’t surprise me. After all, everyone knew his rule. One night stands only. He wasn’t labeled a playboy for nothing. “You will be my last. I haven’t touched another woman since Vegas. And I won’t. I meant my vows, Wife.”

Gosh, how was I supposed to resist that?

“I haven’t either,” I whispered. “Even those fiancés. I didn’t even kiss them.”

“I know.” Luca’s mouth curved into a wicked smile. “Because I killed them before they had a chance.”

I recalled his words back when we told Nonno about our marriage and my question was answered. He was serious. It should bother me. If there was decency inside me, it would. But something about his protectiveness made me all hot and bothered.

But I refused to cave into it. We had time. Like he said, he wouldn’t let me leave him. Besides, my big belly wasn’t exactly attractive. Albeit, by the way Luca watched me, you wouldn’t think so.

He bent to kiss me, softly, then trailed his mouth along my jaw.

“We could finish what we started last night.” Gosh, it was tempting. I arched against him, like a woman starved for a touch. His touch. His lips reached my ear. “Or I can just eat your pussy and give you pleasure. I want to feel you writhe under my touch. Scream my name.”

“No,” I breathed, my resolve quickly melting. I took a step back away from him. “You don’t get to fuck me after all the secrets you’ve kept from me. It would be a reward, not a punishment.”

He frowned. “Watch your mouth. Our unborn child might hear it.” God, he was taking all this to a whole new level.

“All the crap you tell me while pleasuring me and yourself,” I muttered indignantly. “Don’t preach to me, Luca.”

He grinned, a boyish grin that lifted at least five years off him. My heart sped up, and I couldn’t help but wonder what the hell was going on. With him. Or with me. Or my stupid, foolish heart.

“Just imagine the pleasure I will give you when I fuck you,” he said, a seductive tone to his deep voice. Or maybe it was just my hormones. Either way, we both knew it was only a matter of time before we ended up having sex.

God, this man would make me lose my mind.

“No,” I breathed, though there was nothing firm about my voice. “No,” I repeated, more firmly this time.

He shook his head, then ran a thumb across my chin, right below my bottom lip.

“Then get dressed, my beautiful wife and let’s go meet the family.”

Damn it, I forgot all about our lunch date with Uncle and his wife. Thankfully, it was at a restaurant so we just had to make sure the service was efficient and speedy.

My brothers were coming too. *For moral support,* Aiden said.

“Do we have to?” My voice was a tad bit whiny.

He reached out his hand, softly running his thumb over my bottom lip.

“They can’t marry you off,” he said softly. “You’re my wife. You’re untouchable. Now let’s show them how fucking real I am about killing them if they try something.”

A strangled laugh escaped me. “You’re crazy.”

“Crazy about someone,” he muttered, although I wasn’t sure if I heard him right.

My heart sped up and grew. His heavy gaze met mine, the two of us drowning in unspoken words and a past that had finally caught up to us.

Then his eyes flickered with mischief. “I might even let you drive my car.” Before I could say anything, he added with a wink, “If you promise not to burn it.”

Goddamn him. He was so bloody sexy.

He gave me that boyish smile. “Get ready, my pregnant wife. Let’s go show those fuckers whose wrath they’ll earn if they try anything with you and our baby.”

“But not my brothers,” I warned him, though a stupid smile played on my lips and my heart glowed.

Despite everything that had just happened, I still felt a sense of foreboding and couldn’t understand why.

I didn’t recognize the signs.

LUCA’S CAR pulled smoothly into the reserved spot.

True to his word, he let me drive his red Mercedes AMG Vision Gran Turismo. But I’d come to a realization, Luca was the worst backseat driver. He told me what lane to take, when and who to pass. It drove me nuts. But we arrived safely.

Thanks to my cool nerves. And my ability to resist killing him.

Luca stepped out of the car and strode around to my side to open the door for me. I took his hand and grunted as I pushed myself up.

“Don’t worry, we’re leasing a new car for the baby,” he assured. “It will be delivered tomorrow.”

“What kind of car?” I asked curiously.

“Range Rover for you. Mercedes G-Benz for me.” He always managed to surprise me. “If you don’t like it, you can get another one. But we’ll have to check the safety ratings. I did research on this one. And on car seats. So when you go shopping with Áine, don’t worry about that.”

I knew without an ounce of doubt that he’d be a good father. Some men had it ingrained in them. My father did. And so did my husband.

“Thank you.” Emotion squeezed my chest. Not sad, but not exactly happy either. I couldn’t quite pinpoint it.

He lifted my arm and placed a firm kiss on the inside of my wrist, where my pulse thudded softly.

“You belong to me. I’ll keep you and our daughter safe. No matter what.”

My hand in his, we took two steps when someone blocked our way. Instinctively, Luca stepped forward, blocking me.

“No need for all that with me.” It was my mother’s voice. I instantly stiffened. I had purposely not gone to visit her since I returned. I didn’t want her sneer nor her criticism.

“Hello, Mother,” I greeted her coldly, taking a step to stand next to Luca. “I thought you hated the city.”

And there it was. The same sneer she always held whenever she looked at me.

“I thought you hated the King family yet here you are,” she replied with venom. “Married to one. Margaret King. It doesn’t even sound good.”

God how she irked me! She behaved like an immature bitch. I swallowed what I really wanted to say and kept it civilized.

“It’s actually DiMauro,” I replied instead. “So no need to worry about me.”

She opened her mouth to say something, but Luca cut her off.

“My apologies,” he said. He sounded anything but apologetic. “My wife and I have a date so this isn’t a good time for a social call.”

Without another word, he led me towards the entrance and we walked into the restaurant with everyone’s eyes on us.

The host rushed to us. “Wonderful to see you again, Sir.”

“Pablo,” Luca nodded. “Meet my wife.” He traded my hand for my lower back, his palm pressing on it. It was soothing. Assuring.

As we walked, following Pablo to our reserved table, Luca bent his head and brushed his lips against my earlobe.

“You look beautiful.” My insides fluttered. He didn’t say anything when I came out of the bedroom dressed. But his eyes were the darkest green I had ever seen.

Now as we walked together, the pink long sleeve maternity chiffon dress swished, brushing against his three-piece suit. The dress accented my stomach and the surplice neck décolleté highlighted my boobs. My gaze kept lowering to it to ensure it wasn’t lower than it should be.

“It’s my job to stare at your boobs,” Luca remarked amused. “Not the other way around.”

I rolled my eyes, unable to come up with a witty response.

It was another side-effect of pregnancy. My brain was slower and so was my tongue.

“Who owns this place?” I asked instead.

“We do.” His eyes traveled around the place. “We’ll keep it even after we move to Sicily. Only legitimate business runs through here.”

“Oh.”

I glanced around as we moved towards the back of the restaurant. It was classy, but there was a romantic atmosphere to it. One whole wall was made of glass and looked out onto the busy New York street. The south wall had exposed brick, the bronze chandeliers flickering lights against it.

The bar in the far corner reminded me of the old movies. The entire back wall behind the bar was brick and had mirror cabinets stocked up with hundreds of shiny bottles. The barstools in front of it were made out of red vintage leather, while the floor was made up in black and white.

Pablo stopped at the door that blended with the mirrors. He pulled it open, revealing a large yet very intimate room.

A table that could sit twenty sat in the middle of it and the entire room smelled divine.

“Our guests will be coming shortly too,” Luca informed him.

Music played softly in the background as Luca pulled out a chair for me.

“Thank you.”

He smiled at me, his eyes a deeper, darker color in this light. “I’m sorry about your mother. Not sure how she learned we’d be here.”

“Yeah.”

“What did she think she’d accomplish by cornering you like that?” he demanded to know.

A heavy breath left me. “I stopped wondering long ago what my mother’s angle or goal is. I’m sure she has one, but it changes so frequently it is exhausting to keep up.”

He watched me pensively, as if he was contemplating something but he didn’t say anything else on the matter.

I twisted my hands in my lap, glancing at the door.

“Are you nervous?” Luca asked.

I shook my head. “No, not really. There isn’t much Uncle can demand. We’re legally married and my aunt can screech all she wants about Áine’s unfortunate wedding to your brother.”

“One day she’ll get over it,” Luca mused.

“You’d think by now she would have,” I grumbled.

A girl dressed in a stylish black pantsuit entered the room and behind her were my uncle and aunt.

“Ah, speak of the devil,” I muttered.

Uncle and Aunt walked in, their expression slightly in awe, glancing left and right.

I went to get up but Luca’s hand came to my shoulder as he stood up.

“Don’t overexert yourself, dear.”

I had to bite the inside of my cheek at his comment. This would require less exercise than sex with him and he wasn’t concerned with that. But I didn’t protest.

Uncle grinned widely and rushed to me. “He’s right. God, girl. Your arse gave me a scare. Disappearing like that.”

I smiled awkwardly. “I didn’t disappear. It was just a long vacation.”

He shook his head. “I almost had a heart attack. I had to go to your Da’s grave and pray for forgiveness.”

Luca smiled coolly. “Maybe you should ask your niece for forgiveness for trying to force a marriage on her.”

Uncle’s brows furrowed. “Maybe, but having Margaret single with a baby in our world would have left her open for targeting. She’d be in

danger.” Uncle grinned. “But all's well that ends well. Both my girls married King brothers. Who would have ever thought?”

Well, at least Uncle seemed relieved that I was married. Staining our family name and the bullshit that went along with it, I presumed. Never mind it was the twenty-first century.

“It’s not an ideal scenario,” Aunt commented.

I didn’t have time to roll my eyes because my brothers stormed in. Loud. Big. And happy.

This time I stood up and wobbled straight to their arms. “God, we can’t even sandwich her in anymore,” Tyran teased. “She’s bigger than a house.”

I pinched him. Hard. “Ouch.”

“Wimp.”

Before he could utter a comeback, the door opened and numerous servers entered the room with tray after tray, filling the table with all different kinds of food.

“I took the liberty of having the chef prepare everything on the menu.” His gaze met mine and he winked. Gosh, I could kiss him right now. This would definitely shorten our lunch. There’d be no debating what to order, no delays on cooking.

Perfect.

The lunch was better than I could have hoped for.

When Luca and I returned to our penthouse, I kicked off my shoes and sighed in relief.

“Do you need your feet rubbed?” he offered.

I chuckled softly. “How can a woman say no to that?”

Taking a deep breath, I slipped my hand into his steady one.

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Chapter Thirty-Three

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MARGARET

Timing was peculiar.

The mail came addressed to me with the matching golden letters on the envelope. It was only a few days ago that I admitted my bucket list to my husband.

I read the invitation again. Fancy golden letters on the red matte card.

You're cordially invited to La Sensazione erotica. Black tie dress code. One partner allowed.

"What's that?" Luca appeared behind me, sneaking up on me. The man could move as silently as a cat burglar when he wanted to.

I showed him the card and his eyebrows shot up. Then he came around the couch and I immediately shifted my legs. He flopped on the couch and propped his feet on the coffee table, then pulled my ankles, placing them over his lap.

We had fallen into a routine. A typical married life. At least I thought it was. I felt comfortable around him. I loved his strong, firm fingers on my skin. I loved talking to him. Truthfully, there wasn't much I didn't love about him.

"You going to do it?" he questioned, his gaze flickering to the television as his fingers roamed my ankles, massaging the skin. I chewed on my bottom lip. "If you're worried, I'll go with you."

An incredulous breath escaped me. "Won't that be weird?" I questioned. "The two of us going there?"

He chuckled. "Probably not any more weird than how we got here." His fingers rubbed my skin, up and down. The feel of his rough skin against my

soft one, massaging had my body relaxing. “Besides, who cares what anyone thinks! As long as you cross stuff off your bucket list.”

I watched him suspiciously. “Is this your doing?”

His expression was untelling. He had a good poker face. Too good of a poker face. He could be so exasperating.

“Luca,” I growled softly.

The circular motion of his fingers soothed and never ceased.

“I did secure the invitation,” he admitted. “I want you to check the items off your bucket list. We can go now. Or after the baby is born. Whatever you want.”

“Oh my God,” I gasped. My husband certainly listened when I talked. A strangled laugh escaped me. “Are you trying to get them all checked off?”

His lips curved. “First I need to drag them all out of you.”

I grinned, gently pushing my foot into his thigh. “I really don’t know why I didn’t like you before.”

He looked at me, though there was no humor on his face.

“Me either,” he replied somberly, something hot burning in his eyes that sent waves of fire through my veins.

Luca DiMauro was getting under my skin. Slowly but surely.

THE NEXT DAY, we walked through the hall of the club together.

Holding the invitation between my fingers, my insides hummed with excitement and anticipation. The red carpet was plush under our feet as we walked down the hall, following a petite brunette.

The place was surprisingly quiet, the only noise coming from the rustle of my blue satin gown that Luca insisted I wear. When I complained about my belly, he shrugged and said, “I don’t give a fuck. Let them all see how gorgeous you are while pregnant.”

How was a woman to resist those words?

I nudged Luca with my shoulder. “Please tell me you haven’t been with anyone here,” I whispered, pointing my eyes in front of us.

He shook his head and relief washed over me. I have started to dread the day I’d see one of his exes. He must have one on each corner.

I had started to think of him as mine. Someone to call when I was in a bind. Someone to call when I needed a shoulder to cry on. Someone to watch a movie with.

Jesus, it almost sounded like a boyfriend without the sex. My libido immediately responded willing to take it a step further.

Lovely!

Red carpets and walls covered in black flocked wallpaper surrounded us as we made our way deeper into the building. *La Sensazione erotica*. The name of the club left nothing to the imagination.

“You have a private room,” the girl announced, her voice raspy. It didn’t escape me how she kept eyeing Luca. It took all I had not to grab his hand and scream, *He’s mine*. “It allows a clear view to the entire room and… *events*.”

Oh geez. I had half a mind to tell her we weren’t voyeurs. Just crossing something off my bucket list. But then I just shrugged. It didn’t matter what she thought.

She finally came to a stop and opened the door. Once I entered, my mouth gaped.

“Thank you, that will be all,” Luca told the woman, then nudged me inside.

The room had the black wallpaper and red carpets, just like the rest of the place. A large window. A sofa and a wall with a fully stocked bar.

It was fascinating. I watched as a woman fell to her knees, her eyes on her partners. Her hands behind her, her tongue swept over her bottom lip and she opened her mouth with an eager expression on her face.

“I don’t get it,” I muttered.

“Don’t get what?” Luca questioned. Unlike me, his eyes were on me. He didn’t seem into all this.

My eyes flickered his way, then back to the scene in front of me. “Why is she so eager to serve him?” I tilted my head sideways. “I mean, it’s only for his benefit and his pleasure. Yet, she seems to be begging for it.”

“How many times have you given a blow job before?” Luca’s question came out in a growl.

I shrugged my shoulders. “Once or twice.”

Suddenly, Luca sat up straight and took my chin between his fingers. “Names.”

I blinked confused. “Huh?”

“I want their names,” he demanded.

A strangled laugh escaped me. “You’re insane. I’m not giving you their names.” His stare burned a hole through me. “Why do you want them?” I asked, my voice a notch lower.

“So I can kill them,” he deadpanned. Somehow I didn’t think he was joking.

“Okay, that’s a bit overboard. Relax there. It was in college and honestly, I can barely remember their names. Besides, you were one of them. Vegas, remember?” Then I pointed to my stomach while he just grinned. I narrowed my eyes. “Maybe I should ask for the list of women’s names you’ve been with so I can kill them. But then that might take a few years, huh?”

He leaned back, flashing me a smile. “I honestly don’t remember their names, but if you want to kill them, I can help you. After all, I want you to be happy.”

I shook my head incredulously. “This has to be romanticism at its best,” I snarked sarcastically.

He widened his knees, shifted me over his lap, then pulled me to sit between his legs. He sank back further into the couch, taking me with him. I leaned against his solid chest. His hot breath against my nape and his arm wrapped around my waist.

Suddenly the show was forgotten and the only thing I could focus on was him. He was touching me everywhere.

His breath. His hard chest. His thighs.

My core pulsed with need, and I shifted a little when his hand pulled me back.

“Be still.” His hot breath against my ear sent shivers down my spine.

So I shifted again, just to rebel a little bit. We’d been getting along too well. I regretted my rebellion instantly. His hard cock ground against my ass and sent a hot pulsing need through my veins. And a soft moan escaped my lips.

“Watch the show.” His teeth nipped my sensitive earlobe. He didn’t move or put space between us. If anything, he was even closer. “So we can cross this off your bucket list.”

My eyes immediately obeyed him and returned to the show. The woman was on her knees, her head bobbing back and forth. The man’s fingers gripped her hair, his eyes half-lidded on her and his hips thrusting into her

mouth. The obvious desire between the man and the woman giving us a show sent an inferno blazing through my veins. My breathing got choppy. My skin was pulled taut. Even from here, I could see the glistening desire trickling down the woman's thighs.

I couldn't sit still any longer. I shifted again, Luca's hard cock grinding against me and my head fell back against his shoulder.

"Is it turning you on, Wife?" His lips touched the curve of my ear and sent a shudder through me. It was the first time he called me *wife*. Surprisingly, I didn't dislike it. In fact, I loved the sound of it.

My head tilted slightly to allow him to nuzzle my neck. I must have lost my mind, but at this moment I didn't care. His mouth on my skin burned in the most delicious way.

Luca shifted, his fingers slowly lowering down my growing stomach. Maybe it was the pregnancy. Or maybe it was just him. There was something so goddamn erotic when he touched my belly.

It should freak me out. It should have repelled me but it didn't. And the way he hummed with guttural satisfaction when his palm pressed gently against the spot where my little girl usually kicked had me going wild.

Jesus, these hormones would be the death of me.

"You want me to touch you." It wasn't a question. His breath ghosted against the skin of my neck. I held my breath, waiting for more. I should have known that wasn't good enough for him. "Beg me to touch you, Wife, and you'll come harder than ever before."

I bit my lip, refusing to cave in.

His hand slipped further down between my legs and I parted them wider, needing him on my core. My pussy was already swollen and throbbing, needing the pleasure.

My hands lowered down to press against his hips and my fingers curled into his muscles as my hips moved unconsciously.

His fingers brushed against my panties. "You're wet," he groaned in my ear. "I can smell your arousal. Your pretty pussy wants this, needs this." A moan slipped between my lips. My desire burned hot. "Beg me."

My eyelids were heavy, watching the show but not seeing it. The only thing I could focus on was this man, whispering in my ear. Tempting me.

"Maybe my water broke," I rasped, ignoring his demand to beg. I'd never beg.

I licked my lips but no words left my mouth. He pressed a kiss to my shoulders.

He cupped my pussy, then tightened his grip. Like he owned that most private part of me.

“So stubborn.” Then he cursed. “So fucking wet. Is that for me?”

Yes, yes, yes, I wanted to scream, but instead only a whimper left my lips. His free hand moved to my breast and yanked the top of my dress, then the lace of my bra down. His hand on my pussy pressed me firmly against his own body while he pinched my sensitive nipple with his other hand.

My legs spread a little wider and he must have gotten a hint. He shoved his hand inside my panties and thrust two fingers inside me. My back arched.

“Jesus, you're clenching around my fingers like it’s my cock.” His voice was deeper. More guttural than I had ever heard it before.

He began to move his fingers, deep inside me, while his palm brushed against my clit. It had been so long since someone had touched me. It made me hyper-sensitive. He found my G-spot and stroked it lightly. My body shuddered and I lifted my hips, moaning… his name.

My brain was too fuzzy with the pleasure he was building inside me. I’d be embarrassed later. Now, I just needed a release.

He nipped my earlobe lightly. “Take what you need, Wife.”

His strokes in and out of my pussy were relentless. His thumb traced circles around my clit. It made every cell of my body tremble with desperate need for release. Each thrust drove me closer to the edge.

From a distant corner of my mind, I could hear flesh slapping against flesh. Sounds of pleasure. Screams. But they weren’t mine. I’d lost interest in the scene in front of me and found it in my husband.

Luca DiMauro was sin and temptation. I needed him right now.

“You’re going to be the death of me, Wife,” he muttered then withdrew his fingers. Before I could protest he ripped my panties, the sound of shredding filling the air and then I was being lifted off of him. I sat on the couch, my gown bulged up around my waist and my legs wide open.

Before disappointment could wash over me, he fell down to his knees in front of me. My glistening pussy in full view.

“Let me touch you. Let me taste you. Let me have you.” His words shattered the walls inside me so effortlessly that it would terrify me if I

wasn’t so far gone in this lust land. “Please, Wife. If nothing else, let me bring you pleasure.”

I could barely breathe. I couldn’t think. “Yes,” I breathed. “But only if you take your pleasure too.”

It was all the words he needed because his hands gripped my hips.

“Spread your legs wider.” His command was rough, his voice deeper.

With an unsteady inhale, I complied and no sooner than I had, he pulled me to the edge of the couch. His gaze fell between my thighs.

“Make yourself comfortable,” he rasped. “I don’t want anything happening to the baby.”

Fuck. That was so goddamn hot and erotic.

Leaning my back against the couch, I did as I was told and his head lowered between my legs. I shuddered under the first hot touch of his tongue. He had barely gotten started, and I was already close to my orgasm. He took a slow lap from the entrance to my clit and a deep rush of pleasure flooded all my senses. My fingers dug into his thick hair, running my blunt nails against his scalp.

His hands held my legs securely open as he took his time devouring me. He swirled his tongue over my clit before sucking and a deep moan vibrated through the air. He must have liked it because he hummed against my pussy, then pushed his tongue into my entrance.

His smoldering gaze found mine and as he ate my pussy like it was his favorite dessert, our eyes held each other like they were locked together. It was the most erotic thing I had ever experienced. While his mouth sucked and licked my clit, his finger slid inside me, moving in and out. Again and again.

Pleasure ignited, the wick burned hot through my bloodstream. I rocked my hips against his mouth, unable to break the gaze that bound us. He made deep noises of satisfaction, urging me on.

“Please, Luca,” I begged on a breathless moan. “I need–”

My hands tugged at his hair, my hips grinding against him.

His fingers curled inside me as he continued lapping me steadily. He fingered me harder and faster, building hot pressure inside me. With his eyes still focused on me, pleasure exploded through my veins. There was no smugness on his face, only reverence as the languid heat spread through every inch of my body.

His mouth trailed over my inner thigh as I pulsed around his fingers. He continued moving them slowly in and out. A shaky breath slipped through my lips. My fingers still gripped his hair, not ready to let him go.

With our breathing still filling the air, our gazes clashed. His hungry and mine eager to satisfy that hunger. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, his eyes never wavering. Then he rose to his feet and sat down next to me, stretching out, his hand coming around me. The show still went on but neither one of us paid it any attention.

I went to stand up but he held me back, shaking his head. “I want to reciprocate,” I protested in a soft voice.

“This was for you,” he stated.

I wondered how many blowjobs this man had gotten over his lifetime. I had done it only a handful of times, and the last time had been with him. He didn’t complain, like the ones before him had, so I shouldn’t have felt nervous about giving him one. Yet I did.

Or maybe he didn’t want me. My eyes flickered to his groin and found evidence of his arousal.

“I want you to feel good too,” I murmured softly.

I meant the words. I’d figure out the consequences later, but he had given and I wanted to reciprocate. I wanted to make him feel as good as he made me feel.

Shifting to my feet, he pulled me down.

“Straddle me,” he demanded.

I didn’t need him to repeat it. I shifted around and did as he ordered, my belly the only space between us.

“Hmm,” I murmured, dragging my hand down his chest. The material of his dress shirt felt cool under my palm. But the feel of his hard muscles enticed me. I loosened the first button, then the next, the glimpse of inked skin slowly coming to view.

The encounter came to mind when I caught him jacking off in the shower. On our honeymoon.

His lips were barely an inch away. A tremor ran through me as I closed the distance. Our breaths mixed. My mouth brushed against his. Then I pressed my lips to his and kissed him. Lazily. Softly. He parted his mouth and I slid my tongue inside.

He tasted of whiskey, sin, and temptation. Like my husband. Like *mine*.

A groan vibrated deep in his chest and his hand came to my nape. He cupped the back of my head in a tightening hold as he took control of the kiss. He sucked on my tongue. Explored every single corner of my mouth. My heart drummed in my ears, blood rushed through my veins.

I never wanted to come up for air. Death by a kiss would be the most delicious way to go. I lightly dragged my teeth over his bottom lip.

He nipped my bottom lip. “You’d be worth dying for, Wife,” he muttered.

His hard cock ground against my core, waking a sex-starved monster inside me.

“Maybe you’re going to be the death of me, Husband,” I replied.

Something like conflict danced across his expression but it was gone as quickly as it came.

My eyes lowered between us, my pregnant belly filling the gap between us. He still had his pants on.

“This might be awkward with my pregnant belly.”

He considered the words, then shifted us so that he laid back on the couch and my knees were straddling him while I sat on top of him.

I reached for his belt and unbuckled it. The sound of the zipper followed, electrifying the air. Before I could reach inside his pants, his big hand wrapped around mine. My eyes flicked to Luca’s gaze, my eyebrows raised in question.

With expert movements, he loosened his tie and yanked it off.

“Blindfold,” he rasped.

“But I want to see you.”

“Blindfold will make it better. Trust me,” He pushed his hips up, showing me what I’d be missing. A shiver rolled through me, pressure and heat sparking as he ground my clit against his pelvis.

I was a weak, weak woman, because I found myself nodding. Eagerly at that.

He sat half-way up, pulling a blindfold from the drawer of the table beside the couch, and expertly put the blindfold on. Once he was satisfied it was on tightly, I heard the rustle of clothes. He took my hands and put them on my chest.

“Hold on.”

I barely had time to process the words, when he grabbed my hips and thrust his hips up and then he was inside me. A sharp gasp left me as he

dragged me down his cock, filling me to the hilt.

Time stilled.

My pulse skidded to an awkward stop, then resumed its wild pounding. My skin buzzed, coming alive for the first time since Vegas.

He was big and so deep inside of me that it stung. A delicious kind of feeling. Everything seemed heightened with the blindfold on. I could hear his hard breathing, feel his heart thundering against my palms.

“Do we need condoms?” I choked out.

“I’m clean,” he declared. My palms roamed his chest. “I always use protection and get tested frequently.” He paused, as if he hesitated before he continued, “I might not last long. You were the last woman I fucked.”

He’d said that before but his admission still came as a shock. The infamous playboy gave up all women after me. I hadn’t expected it. Not from a playboy like him.

Somehow it meant even more.

“I haven’t been with anyone since I got knocked up,” I whispered my own admission, although he knew it already.

“There’ll never be anyone else for you,” he growled. “Nor me.” I nodded my head in confirmation. “Now ride me, Wife.” God, the raspy note of his voice had a shiver rolling through me. The sensation of him deep inside of me drove me to the edge. “One flicker of pain and we stop. We won’t harm the baby. Understood?”

My chest cracked, letting him deeper inside my heart. Inch by inch he was taking over my soul.

I slid my hands up his chest, feeling his warm skin. I wished we were both naked, skin against skin. But there’d be other times. I knew there would be as surely as I knew my name.

Gripping his shoulders, I began to move. I rode him slowly, up and down his cock, feeling his piercing rub me in delicious ways. His hands on my hips guided me up and down, winding my pleasure higher and higher. I couldn’t see his face but the groan that sounded in his throat told me everything.

A shudder rolled through his body. I felt it as if it was my own. His hands held me tightly as I moved up and down his cock. I fucked him slowly, then picking up the speed as his hands started moving me faster. I bounced on his cock harder.

“You okay?” he grunted, as if he held himself back.

“More,” I demanded.

“Is the baby–”

“Fuck, Luca. The baby is fine. Please, harder. I need more.”

I couldn’t breathe. Hot pressure began to build as he yanked me up and down on his shaft. I could feel him stretching me, so deep inside me. When I felt his mouth on my nipple, sucking and then he gently bit, a shudder shook through me as pleasure burst.

“Fuck, you’re beautiful when you come.” He continued rocking my body, back and forth, his cock piercing me through my orgasm. My breaths came out erratic and heavy.

His body tensed, and his hands tightened on my waist as he thrust his hips upwards impaling me.

He let out a masculine groan that sent goosebumps dancing over my skin. He spilled inside me, his mouth on my belly. His kiss soaked through my skin and into my bloodstream.

His touch and taste became a drug. Even worse, I started to crave his words and his company.

His cock still inside me, his hand cupped my cheek.

“You’re mine, Margaret,” he said, punctuating the words like he wanted to prove a point. “You and our baby. Mine.”

Bu-bum. Bu-bum.

“Yours,” I murmured sleepily, languid heat from the orgasms he’d given me still swimming through my veins.

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Chapter Thirty-Four

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LUCA

My wife's cheeks were stained red all the way home.

It was a good look on her. She rested her head against the headrest, watching me drive with a soft smile on her lips. I had never met anyone who could be so soft and yet so sharp; two extremes depending where you stood in her life. I hoped this meant we were both going in the direction that would make our family better. Stronger. For our little girl and hopefully some boys in the future too.

Peace washed over me. I could always breathe easier when she smiled. Her happiness was the only thing that mattered to me. But when she smiled at me it made my chest glow. My blood thrummed in approval at having her eyes on me, her hands on me, her scent in my space.

"What's the next thing on your bucket list?" I asked her. "I really like your list."

She chuckled softly. "How about you tell me something from your list? This should be a two way street. You make my wish come true and I make yours."

I grinned.

"Deal." Okay, maybe I agreed too fast because her eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Sleep in my bed," I added quickly. "That's on my wish list."

She pursed her lips and her eyes fell down my body. From the moment I felt her soft lips on mine, she has been my addiction. She could demand I end my life and I probably would. For her. Now that she gave her body to me, knowing it was me, there was no point of return.

She *gave* herself to me. No return policy here.

She nodded and I couldn’t fucking wait to get home. The goddamn traffic. It was what sucked about New York. Margaret was a lot happier in Sicily and so was I. Especially after that rendezvous with her mother. If we never saw her again, it would still be too soon.

Maeve Callahan. The fucking two-faced bitch.

She looked just the way I remembered. Just the way my father liked them. Cheap. Sleazy. With big boobs and small brains.

Still, my subjective feelings apart, something about her showing up today bothered me.

My phone beeped, interrupting my thoughts, and once I parked in my underground garage, I pulled the cell out and swept the message open. It was from Guido.

Your grandfather was attacked. No injuries. Don’t have a suspect.

A growl vibrated in my chest and red marred my vision. In Sicily, my grandfather was untouchable. Nobody should have been able to get close enough to attack him. Was it Marchetti? It couldn’t be. He was deadly but not stupid, and he wouldn’t ruin our long standing business relationship. Nor the fact that our children would one day connect our families.

“What’s the matter?” Margaret’s voice penetrated the red mist in my brain.

I was about to tell her nothing when Nonno’s words echoed in my ear. He wanted me to have a confidante. A partner. Not just a woman. Nonno had that with my grandmother. I wanted that in my wife. She was so much more than just the woman I pined for.

“Nonno was attacked.” God, even saying those words and the thought of him being in that position had me fuming.

She sat up straight, deep concern in her eyes. “Is he okay? Is he injured?”

“He’s okay. No injuries.”

“Does he know who attacked him?”

“They don’t know who did it.” Fuck, it was the worst time. I didn’t want to leave Margaret, especially now that we were making headway towards building our relationship. Then there was her upcoming ultrasound. It would be our first one together and probably one of the last ones since we were approaching full term. Another four weeks.

Shit. Except I couldn’t leave him vulnerable and alone there. He needed me.

“We should bring him here,” Margaret suggested, her voice firm. “Then when we settle your business stuff, we all go back, figure out who’s behind the attack, and make them pay.”

She managed to surprise me. Again. Her big heart. Her softness. Her backbone.

She was the perfect package. My ideal match.

“You wouldn’t mind that? Nonno coming here?” I questioned just to be sure. “Nonno can be quite the handful when he leaves Sicily. He complains about everything and compares it all to his hometown.”

She grinned.

“I am. We can find every single faulty thing with this city and count the days to when we travel back to Sicily,” she said with a smile.

I grabbed her nape and pulled her closer to me, brushing my mouth against her ear.

“When we get home, I’m going to fuck you slowly,” I breathed in her ear, loving how a shiver rolled down her body and her nipples perked under her beautiful dress. “In every possible way.”

And I did. Until she begged for a reprieve then fell soundly asleep.

In my bed. Exactly where she belonged.

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Chapter Thirty-Five

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MARGARET

It was way too hot. It felt like my blanket weighed a hundred pounds, holding me down.

Sighing, I tried to roll over, but something pulled me back. I peeled my eyes open. Not something, but someone pulled me back. There was a man in my bed. Fighting through the heavy confusion that always comes when I first wake up, and my eyes shoot open.

A masculine groan vibrated.

“Go back to sleep.” My heart fluttered, racing in my chest. “You’re fulfilling my bucket list.”

“Jesus,” I breathed in a combination of relief and choked laugh. “I thought there was a killer in my bed.”

A low chuckle came from him.

“Not too far off.”

His arm wrapped around me, his body heating mine, and his chest pressed against me. It felt right waking up in his bed. I belonged to him and he belonged to me. My eyes darted to the clock on the nightstand, its green digits glowing in the dark.

Six A.M.

The winter days kind of sucked. It was dark for too long. Cold. And just depressing. I missed Sicily and its warmth. Hundreds of colorful homes in the old streets of Palermo. Luca and I would build our life there.

Away from my mother. I didn’t want any more accidental run-ins with her. I didn’t trust her as far as I could throw her. Her little jab didn’t escape

me. Except it was out of character for her. Usually, she reserved those for a time when the two of us were alone.

Pushing my mother out of my thoughts, my mind shifted to the hotter, steamier things. The events of last night seeped through my memories and a tremor rolled through me. It was hands down the hottest night of my life.

New York with Luca, my husband, wasn't such a terrible affair. But I still couldn't wait to go back to Sicily.

"I miss Sicily," I whispered in a low voice. "I almost want to go with you."

The idea of Nonno in danger terrified me. I came to care for him a lot.

"Me too," he murmured against my earlobe. "I'll go get him and bring him here. Once all is settled here, we'll go back and start our life there."

That sounded perfect. Our life. Our start. Our story really started there so it was right that we live to our old age there. Okay, maybe our story really started at Temptation but truthfully, that was our war stage. Sicily was our friendship and love stage.

"Will you be done with everything here before the baby is due?" I asked him. "I want her to be born there."

"It'd make Nonno the happiest he's ever been if she was."

He shifted, pulling me closer to him. He was hard, his length pressing against my backside, and instantly Sicily was forgotten.

God, the man was so warm and half-naked, just the press of his body against mine sent my toes curling in pleasure. If I'd known it felt this good spooning with my husband, I would have climbed into his bed a long time ago.

"You'd do that?" I asked, pushing my butt against him. A rumble sounded in his throat when I shifted and rubbed against him. "Leave your brother, your business and friends behind. Just so little Penelope can be born in Sicily?"

Okay, maybe I was testing to see just how far he would go to make me happy, although he seemed more than willing to comply. We'd come a long way in our relationship, but I still needed reassurance. Or maybe I wanted another round of last night's events.

His hand wrapped around my waist, roaming my belly, and I swore the baby loved feeling his warm palm against it. I could feel her pushing against his hand, even see my stomach shifting with her.

"I can feel her move," he rasped against my ear.

“She likes it when she feels you.” God, if that alone made me choke up, I’d be a mess when this baby came. “I can already tell she’ll be a daddy’s girl. Little traitor.”

But there was no bite to my words. Even after all these years I remembered my love for Da and all his affection. I was a daddy’s girl through and through. But I wouldn’t be a distant and uncaring mother like mine.

Our little girl would have love and protection from both of us.

“I’ll put in a good word for you,” he teased, nipping at my earlobe. “If you’re nice to daddy.”

He growled into my ear playfully, his hands lowering down my belly and between my thighs. “You’re ready for me,” he groaned in satisfaction.

Pleasure rocketed through me at the brush of his fingers against my sensitive clit. I couldn’t help but roll my ass back against his erection. He grabbed my hip, and I thought he was going to stop me. He didn’t. He ground me harder against him. Heat drifted and tightened between my legs as I rolled my hips, nothing but the rustle of sheets and the sound of our breaths disturbing the cocoon of our room. I turned in his arms, and he rolled onto his back so I could once again straddle him.

The way he watched me made me feel like the most beautiful woman in the world. It didn’t matter to him that I had gained forty pounds, or that my boobs were the size of melons and my stomach was as big as a watermelon.

He ran his hands up my thighs, his half-lidded eyes taking in my naked body. He touched me everywhere and it still seemed not to be enough. He did it again, then brought his palms to my belly feeling for that little life inside me.

The little life he claimed and murmured soft words to. And there was nothing more erotic than that to me. A tough papa bear melting for the little unborn life inside me.

My gaze dropped to his lips and I leaned in to kiss him. He met me halfway.

And I realized, he always met me halfway.

THREE HOURS LATER, we were both showered and dressed. I opted for a powder blue, maternity maxi dress that hugged my body and outlined my belly. He put on a pair of jeans that made his ass fucking finer, if that was even possible. I bet men around the globe were jealous of that fine looking ass, and he was all mine.

"Round four?" he suggested, catching me red handed staring at his ass.

His gray Ralph Lauren sweater accentuated his olive skin and made his eyes appear lighter. His sporty Rolex watch gave him a casual, yet expensive vibe. He did well disguising his ruthlessness, but I knew he had a gun tucked in the back. He wore dark loafers and a woolen coat in gray. I had given up a coat in my third trimester. I was a furnace all the time.

"I'd make it worth your while," he murmured against my lips.

I shook my head. "Then I'd need a nap."

"You can nap. I can get a driver to take me to the airport."

I shook my head. "No. I'll see you off like a proper wife."

He must have liked that answer because he pecked me on the cheek and dropped the subject. I grabbed my purse as he took a firm hold of my hand and we walked towards the elevator.

"Make sure you come back fast," I told him as we entered the elevator. "Who's going to watch movies with me tonight?"

He gave me that boyish, dashing smile. "I called your brothers. I asked them to keep an eye on you until I'm back. I told them you like to watch old movies, so they said they're bringing their own movie collection."

I groaned out loud. "Luca," I protested. "Why would you do that?"

"My bride won't be alone."

"I'm no longer a bride and I'm fine being alone," I snickered. I certainly didn't need a babysitter in the form of my brothers.

His lips curved softly. "Do it for me then. I'll worry less."

That alone told me he had a lot on his mind. "Fine," I sighed. "Just this once."

Our eyes met in the reflection, the soft expression on his face had my boundaries shredding to nothing. In fact, they might be burned to ashes. He had embedded himself in every piece of me.

"Thank you, mia moglie." God, I loved it when he called me his wife. In English, in Italian. Any damn language. As long as he called me his.

The doors opened, and he guided me out toward another section of the garage. He led me to a sleek Range Rover.

“Want to drive your car or mine?” he questioned. “It’s all ours but which one do you want to test run first?”

“Let’s do yours,” I mused, bumping my shoulder into his. “That way if I crash it, mine is still intact.”

He threw his head back and laughed. A true, carefree laugh that filled my chest with warmth and touched me deep in my heart. It was unsettling. It was fragile. He opened the door for me, helped me in like the gentleman he wasn’t, then rounded the car to get beside me.

My eyes flickered to the backseat. As expected, Luca got top of the line everything. But what was unexpected was the car seat that already sat installed and ready to go.

“Why is there a pink, Gucci bag back there?” I asked him curiously.

“It’s our hospital bag.” When I gave him a blank look, he continued. “Diaper bag. Stuff for mommy and baby. There is another bag in your car. We can’t be prepared enough.”

My heart swelled. His name settled into a permanent place in my heart, marking it as his. It was risky. Friends who deeply care for each other was probably much safer, yet my own heart refused to heed the warning.

“Let’s go,” Luca announced, putting his hands behind his head and stretching his legs.

I narrowed my eyes on him as I put the car into drive. “I’m not your driver.”

He chuckled. “Right now you are.”

As we drove from the Upper East Side, he directed me all the way to the airport.

“Backseat driver,” I grumbled as I pulled up to the private airport and shifted his fancy Mercedes into park.

I went to unbuckle my seatbelt but he stopped me. “Don’t get out. It’s cold and windy.”

“Okay.”

His palms cupped my cheeks and he tugged me closer. “Be good while I’m gone,” he murmured, his lips brushing against mine. “No reckless behavior.”

I acted appalled. “I never act reckless.” Then added the word I learned in Italian, “Marito.” *Husband.*

His eyes flickered with amusement. “Been studying Italian?”

“I can’t have you talking to our baby in Italian and me not understanding a single word.”

With another kiss, or five, he finally tore himself from me and exited the car, and I watched him board his private jet. Before he entered the cabin, he turned around, looking sharp and like a million bucks and then shocked the hell out of me.

He blew me a kiss, followed by an arrogant wink. So corny but so fucking sweet.

MY BROTHERS STORMED into the penthouse, dropping a duffel bag in the middle of my living room.

“Jesus, tell me you’re not moving in,” I grumbled, remaining in my seat with my feet propped up on the coffee table.

The twins rolled their eyes. Their leather jackets were soaked, dripping down onto the hardwood. They wore their typical outfit. Jeans. Combat boots. Leather. The only thing I couldn’t seem to spot was their weapons. They always had weapons on them.

I tilted my chin towards the bag. “What the hell is in that thing?”

“Defense,” they both answered in unison.

My eyes flicked to my eldest brother who just shrugged and rolled his eyes.

“Are we expecting a war?” I asked.

“Maybe,” Kyran answered cryptically.

“I’m not even gonna ask,” I muttered, shaking my head.

Aiden took a spot next to me and propped his legs parallel to mine, his arm coming around me. “Don’t worry, sis, I’ll stay and watch over you if those two idiots prefer to get themselves killed.”

Tyran flipped him a bird.

“We know you’re scared,” Kyran taunted.

“And I know you’re stupid,” Aiden retorted. “Don’t mistake scared for smart.” He was tense. When I gave him a questioning look, he just answered, “Business stuff.”

“We can’t let them–” Kyran started but Aiden’s glare cut him off.

The three of them might be close, but they all knew that Aiden would one day take over the Callahan mafia as the head. He couldn't afford to react first and think afterwards. The twins, on the other hand, always reacted. I lost count of times Aiden bailed them out of trouble.

"Get your asses on the couch and shut your mouth," Aiden barked when Tyran opened his mouth with a clear protest on his face. "We are watching a movie with our sister."

"She needs a puppy to cuddle with," Kyran grumbled. "Not us." I gave him an incredulous look but he just continued, "She might become depressed. At least that's what Mother said."

Of all the things, that was the dumbest thing to suggest. Unsurprisingly, it came from my mother.

"She doesn't want a pet," Aiden barked. "She's allergic, you fucking moron."

"There are pills for that," Tyran said, throwing gum into his mouth.

"And she's pregnant," Aiden said, looking at our brothers like they were the biggest idiots on this planet. They weren't, but they always took our mother's advice. Unfortunately.

I sighed, grabbing the remote. If those three started to bicker back and forth, it'd be a long night. I tuned them out, their back and forth becoming background noise, and I started flipping through the channels as the storm lashed outside. The wind and rain whipped against the glass windows. It'd be hard to sleep without Luca here. Even though we only started sharing our bed, I was already used to having him here every night.

My phone laid in my lap, alongside an uneaten bowl of popcorn. I sent Luca a message half an hour ago, worried about his flight. Hence, my inability to enjoy my favorite snack while watching movies.

The twins flopped on the couch, their large frames making my body shift even in my state.

"Please don't put on your old movies," Tyran grumbled. "I can't handle that shit in my state."

I scoffed. "What state is that? The killer state?"

He turned his head my way, his eyes shining with amusement. "Put on an action movie. Sci-fi. Horror. Western. Anything but those damn old movies where they sing and cry until they are smooching all over. They can't even give us a decent sex scene."

Kyran jumped up and strode to the window, staring out. What he thought he'd see from all the way up here was beyond me?

"What do you want to watch?" I asked him. "Give me a title and I'll put that on."

"Put *Avatar* on," Tyran said. "It has a little romance in it."

"The one with the blue people?" I asked incredulously.

"Don't discriminate against blue people," Kyran uttered as he made his way back from the window. I could see restlessness all over his expression. He didn't even try to hide it.

When my husband got back, I'd kill him for sending all three of my brothers my way. This was the furthest thing from relaxing you could get.

"Fine. *Avatar* it is," I conceded.

I scrolled to the search bar and started spelling out the letters.

"Mother asked to see you," Aiden broke the silence. My finger paused over the last letter. "She said she has something to say to you."

I scoffed. My mother barely ever paid any attention to me, never mind talked to me.

"Just meet her for an hour," Kyran attempted to compromise. He always looked for compromises. Except when it was time to go kill someone. Then he was fuck compromise, consequences be damned.

I studied his face. He was only five years older than me but both he and Tyran sometimes seemed much older.

Tyran snatched my bowl of popcorn and started shoving it into his mouth like it was going out of style.

Sometimes, like right now, they seemed much younger, I thought to myself.

The three of us gave him a look and he smiled sheepishly.

"Want some?" he offered.

"Not anymore," I said, stifling a yawn. "Did you even wash your hands before you dug into *my* popcorn?"

"Germaphobe," he accused.

"You better become one too. Before your niece is here. Otherwise, I won't let you hold her."

He grinned, his teeth flashing. "Oh, nobody will keep me away from my niece. We're gonna teach her to curse and–"

I raised my hand, my palm facing him. "Let me stop you right there."

“He’ll wash his hands, Maggie,” Kyran jumped to his brother's defenses. “He actually has a bottle of hand sanitizer always on hand. And he stocked up.”

“Jesus, can you guys shut the fuck up about the hand sanitizers,” Aiden chimed in. “You wanted *Avatar* on. Now watch it, or I’ll send you all to bed.”

Some things never changed with my family.

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Chapter Thirty-Six

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MARGARET

Tonight was Halloween. In a way, it was our anniversary since we met at the Halloween party at Temptation. Yes, it was August but that was irrelevant. I couldn't wait to have Luca back so we could do something special together.

He had been gone for three long days.

He'd called. Messaged. Called again.

He was supposed to be home in two hours. Both he and Nonno. Cassio was picking them up from the airport.

Áine and I were shopping together. Baby clothes and baby furniture was the first thing on our agenda. We barely made it into the first baby store when she dropped the question.

"Why didn't you ask me to help you?" The light accusation in her voice was hard to miss. "I would have helped you."

"Aiden helped me," I said casually. "There was no need to keep a secret from your husband."

I didn't want her to know that it bothered me how Uncle, his wife, and my mother refused to let me go unwed. Instead of helping me, they ganged up on me, cut off all my funds, and gave me an ultimatum. They hadn't cared about my baby's well-being.

"You don't like Cassio," she declared. I didn't think it was that obvious.

I shrugged my shoulders. "I don't hate him, but no, I don't like him."

"He hurt your feelings," she stated, trying to get to the bottom of it.

I sent her an apologetic smile. Just like her mother, she hoped we'd be a big, happy family.

“It’s not the feelings that bother me, Áine. It is the fact that he set me up.” When she opened her mouth, probably to defend him, I quickly continued. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m just as guilty for walking right into that trap, but it doesn’t absolve him of his sins. Yet somehow it feels like only I paid for my mistakes and sins while he’s enjoying himself with the love of his life.”

Silence followed. Heavy and accusing.

“I’ll talk to him.”

“God, no,” I said quickly. I didn’t need more drama. “But thank you. All's well that ends well.”

Except, I was unsure whether this was my ending. Not exactly a happy ending, but maybe a somewhat satisfying ending where my daughter was safe and protected.

“So all is well with you and Luca?” Áine questioned.

“Yes.”

Luca and me. I was still trying to understand that one. He rescued me. Help came in the most unlikely man. Yet, I was unsure what we were. Husband and wife. Friends. Lovers.

But were we more? It felt like it.

Instead of answering her, I reached for a cute onesie with “Watch out boys, my mommy can use a gun” written across the front.

Áine grinned. “If only they knew,” she commented. A strange twinge in my lower abdomen had me twisting my face. “What? You don’t like it?”

“I do,” I said. “I’m going to get it.”

We continued through the store as Áine kept throwing more and more stuff into the cart. The odd pressure in my lower abdomen grew with each minute, but I ignored it. We just saw the doctor yesterday and she said everything looked good. We had another few weeks. I rubbed my lower belly. Maybe the baby was sitting on my kidney or something.

Sixty minutes later, I’d bought enough clothes to cover the first six months of Penelope’s life. I also picked out the furniture for her room. Luca said he didn’t have a preference about the color scheme, so I went with white.

Once I arranged for all of it to be delivered to Luca’s penthouse, we left the store. We headed to the car with the driver that Luca assigned to me. He drove us back to Luca’s penthouse, fighting the city traffic. My phone buzzed and I reached for it quickly, then smiled softly.

Nonno and Luca were home. At the penthouse. Waiting for me.

The moment the car pulled up in the garage, I exited. I had a few bags and Áine offered to help me carry them upstairs. Cassio would be here too. So we took the lift to the top floor. Áine carried three bags and I only had one.

The moment I stepped into the apartment, I froze. A sharp pain shot through my belly. The bag fell to the floor, its contents scattering across the hardwood as I clutched my stomach. My other hand shot out to hold on to the wall.

Something warm trickled down my legs and my eyes lowered down my body. I wore a wool maternity dress, which was soaked now and so were my shoes. Did my water just break?

Áine let out a shocked cry.

“Margaret? Is… Is the baby coming already?”

Blood trickled down my ankles. I didn’t think there’d be blood when my water broke. Nobody said anything about blood.

I was too stunned to utter a word.

“Maggie, talk to me.”

“Get Luca,” I said quietly.

It was that moment that I should have known I fell for Luca. I didn’t ask for my brothers. I asked for the man who’d put me into this predicament.

I began shaking as I clutched my belly.

“You’re bleeding,” Áine whispered, panic in her voice.

My vision swam. My legs started trembling, barely supporting me and Áine’s bags dropped with the thud as she wrapped her arm around my waist and with the other, pulling out her phone. Her hands shook, but I couldn’t focus on that. Only on this piercing, sharp pain in my abdomen.

The faint ringing from her cell phone reached my ears. It seemed to echo somewhere in the distance.

“Something is wrong with Maggie.” The panic in her voice was evident. “We’re in the penthouse.”

The call ended. The door to Luca’s office swung open and my husband’s eyes settled on me. He tried to keep his composure.

“What are you doing at home?” I gritted through pain. “You aren’t supposed to be home for another hour.”

“Never mind that.” Luca rushed toward me. “Is the baby coming already?”

“I think so.” My eyes darted to Nonno behind him and I attempted to smile. It probably came out looking out like a painful grimace. “Hello, Nonno. I’m so happy you’re here. We wanted to have her in Sicily but–”

He smiled. “Little Penelope is ready to meet the world,” he mused.

Another sharp pain shot through my spine and the smile fell off my face.

“We need an ambulance,” Áine screeched.

Luca wrapped an arm around my back as my legs gave away. His gaze traveled down my wet legs. The moment he saw blood, panic crept into his expression. But he kept his cool.

“Don’t panic,” he said softly. “Sometimes water breaking is accompanied by bloody show. Or maybe it’s the mucus plug. I read it happens sometimes.” He looked up at Áine. “Go grab a towel,” he demanded.

As she rushed to get it, I scrunched my nose despite the pain. “Where did you read that?”

He grinned. “My all-knowing book,” he murmured as he lifted me up. “I’ve been reading *What to Expect When Expecting* for months.”

A choked laugh escaped me. “I can’t quite decide if that’s romantic or just weird.”

“Romantic,” he answered, then flicked a glance to his brother and Áine, then Nonno. “I’ll reach out if we need anything. Let her brothers know.”

“Nonno, will you be okay?” I asked him. “Want to come along? Although it won’t be fun.”

Nonno’s wrinkled face softened and he put his frail palm on my cheek.

“I’ll have Cassio bring me when little Penelope is born. This is yours and Luca’s moment.” The lump in my throat grew. “Don’t worry about anything.”

I nodded.

Áine brought the towel just as Luca scooped me up into his arms. She handed it to him and he murmured his thanks, then carried me into the elevator. He was efficient in panic, I’d give him that. We were in his Mercedes G-Benz in no time. He placed the towel down, then gently sat me down in the passenger seat.

“Everything will be okay,” he said as he touched my cheek gently. “We’ll be in the hospital soon.”

“I know.” Now that he was home, I knew he’d ensure we were okay. “Good thing we have our pink Gucci diaper bag in the back,” I teased.

He shook his head, amusement shining in his eyes along with the worry lingering there. He closed the door, and Luca rushed around to slip behind the steering wheel. He revved up the engine and shot out of the underground garage and down the streets of New York.

“I wanted Penelope to be born in Sicily,” I muttered out of nowhere, a dull ache settling somewhere deep between my thighs.

Luca glanced my way.

“Our next baby will be.” His hand reached out and cupped my cheek. “You just make sure you’re okay. You and the baby are all that matter to me.”

There was something close to despair on his face.

I put my own hand over his. “Women have babies every day,” I comforted him. “We’ll be okay. Just–” I swallowed hard. “Just stay with me. Okay?”

“All the king's horses couldn’t pull me away,” he rasped.

We pulled up in front of the hospital entrance. Luca jumped out of the car and jogged around the hood to lift me out. Once in his arms, he strode into the hospital and nurses rushed over to him with a stretcher. Once he’d put me down on it, they rolled me into a room. The doctors and nurses rushed around me. Hooked me up to machines, checked my vitals and before I knew what was going on, I was wheeled away again. Luca stayed with me through it all, holding my hand and whispering comforting words.

We’ve been at it for hours without any progress. Pushing. Crying. More pushing. My cervix wasn’t dilating.

“We need to operate.” That was the first sentence that registered and my eyes filled with panic.

“Luca?” I shook my head. Fear felt like a vice around my throat. “Don’t let anything happen to our baby.”

His eyes narrowed on the doctor and the nurses. “If they want to live, they’ll make sure you *and* our baby live.”

His growly voice vibrated through the room and everybody instantly stilled. The only noise interrupting the silence was the constant *beep, beep, beep* coming from the machine.

“Right?” he gritted. I almost expected him to pull out a gun and threaten them with what would happen should neither one of us make it. I shouldn’t

be okay with it, but it made me feel safer.

Once the doctors and nurses gathered themselves, they all nodded their heads in understanding.

“It appears that the umbilical cord is wrapped around the baby's neck. A C-section will ensure both baby and mother are safe,” the doctor assured.

“Where is Dr. Calabro?” I whined. “She might be able to fix it.” The comment made no sense. I sounded like an idiot. Did it stop me? Absolutely not. “She knows our baby better. She knows my private parts better.”

The doctor stared at me blankly, then turned his attention to Luca who held my hand, this thumb brushing back and forth over my skin, soothing me.

“She’s out of town, mia bella,” Luca murmured. “This doctor knows what’s at stake if he fucks up.”

The doctor nodded his head, reminding me of one of those bobble head toys people stick on their dashboards.

The next moment, I was wheeled down the hallway and into the surgical room, Luca’s hand never releasing mine. He only let go long enough to don the surgical gown the nurses pushed towards him, then my hand was back in his as they prepped me, including when they gave me the epidural to numb me. Luca refused to leave my side as they cut open my belly. Obviously blood didn’t bother him. He’d seen plenty of it.

His presence, his steady gaze, the utter control and strength he projected was exactly what I needed. He’d always make sure we were safe. Nothing could go wrong because Luca wouldn’t allow it.

The whole time, he held my hand and whispered soft words. I only listened to his voice, like it was my prayer. It gave me strength. He’d keep our baby safe.

When the first cry traveled through the air, both of us were startled. Our eyes locked and then he turned toward our daughter. After cleaning her up and taking the necessary measurements, the nurse held our daughter, wrapped in a hospital blanket, and presented her to us.

“Congratulations,” she beamed. “You have a healthy baby girl.”

Emotions swirled inside my chest. My throat squeezed and a tremble rolled through my body. Luca’s eyes shimmered and I let go of his hand.

“Halloween must be our lucky charm, mia bella,” he rasped, his eyes protective and vehement on our baby. “The best gift.”

He remembered too. If only I'd seen this side of him that first night we'd met. It would have saved us so much time.

"Go, hold our daughter." His eyes darted to me, reluctant to leave me, but I nodded reassuringly. "Go."

He brushed a soft kiss against my forehead, then straightened up and headed towards the end of the operating table. The nurse handed him our daughter, and the moment he held her, his expression softened. She looked tiny in Luca's arm and I knew deep down he'd never let anything happen to her. By the fierce expression in his eyes, I knew he'd protect her with his dying breath.

"My little Penelope," he murmured, emotions I had never heard before thick in his voice.

I knew our daughter would be safe. Luca's eyes spoke of protectiveness, of pure determination to destroy anything and anyone that meant her harm. Turning his gaze away from the hospital staff, he approached me with our daughter and lowered himself to the chair beside my head so he could show me our little girl.

"Meet our world," he murmured as he pressed a kiss on my cheek.

"She's so beautiful," I whispered, my voice trembling. I didn't even care that the doctors were busy stitching me back together.

"She's just like her mommy," Luca said quietly. "She'll be breaking boys' hearts. I'll definitely need more guns."

He ran a finger over her cheek. She blinked, already dark hair covering her head. She was tiny, and I wanted nothing more than to protect her. I couldn't wait to hold her.

"Penelope DiMauro," I murmured the name that we had chosen for her. "We'll always love you and keep you safe."

Luca kissed Penelope's forehead. "And I'll always protect you both."

I searched his eyes, and happy tears rolled down my cheeks as overwhelming emotions filled my lungs.

"Forever," we both murmured together.

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Chapter Thirty-Seven

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LUCA

The Vitales’ backyard was a happening place right now.

The weather was beautiful. An unusually warm day for this time of the year.

My nieces chased Matteo like he was the only boy on this planet. One planned his demise while the other planned to lock him in a marriage. My nephews, barely three months old, slept soundly - one in my sister’s arms and the other held by Nico’s mother.

Bianca's hair was slightly ruffled, like she had a quick tumble. She subconsciously ran her fingers through it, combing it. If Nico and her didn’t stop, they’d have a whole soccer team.

But she looked happy. Everyone did.

And that was the best sight ever.

My eyes darted to my own wife and newborn and my chest grew full. Margaret was a devoted mother. She read our baby girl book after book, although little Penelope slept through most of it. Watching them, and being with them, was the best gift I could have ever gotten.

I didn’t deserve them and my fleeting conscience warned there were still ghosts in my past that could destroy it all. But I firmly shut it down, refusing to let anyone or anything take this away from me.

My nieces ran by me, screaming after Matteo who looked like he was ready to find a corner and hide. Penelope stirred in Margaret’s arms but she never woke up.

“She’s so tiny,” Áine whispered softly. She begged to hold her, eager to spoil her first niece. Well, actually her second cousin but whatever.

“But she’s strong,” I told her. “Like her Mamma.”

Margaret chuckled. “I don’t know about that. I think she’s more like her Pàpa.”

“Okay, you two,” Áine teased. “She’s badass like both of you.”

Margaret and I shared an amused look, then grinned. “Yeah, we’re pretty badass.”

Fuck, this had to be what heaven felt like. Once we were back in Sicily, it’d be even better. Nonno chatted with Luciano’s old man, the two reminiscing about the good old days. Satisfied that Margaret was taken care of, I headed to grab a beer. It had been a long few weeks.

The attacks on Nonno’s shipments continued and expanded to some of my dealings. It made no fucking sense and not even Nico was able to trace the shit.

“So Luca King no more, huh?” Luciano came from behind me. I flicked him a look. “Somehow, I’m not surprised you’re taking over Sicily. It’s always been in your blood.”

I shrugged. Truthfully, I always thought it’d go to Cassio, but he made it clear to Nonno he’d rather run his empire here.

“Does your wife agree?” Nico questioned.

“Yes,” I answered. “In fact, she can’t wait to go back to Sicily.”

Cassio shook his head. “I still don’t get that. I love it there too, but for us, that island means something entirely different. But she is Irish, and she fell in love with that country.”

Sasha showed up out of nowhere. “Don’t the Irish usually prefer green grass and potatoes?”

“Don’t Russians usually prefer to have their asses kicked?” I retorted dryly.

Sasha shrugged, grabbing a bottle of vodka and refilling his glass. “Nah. That’s not my thing, buddy.”

I rolled my eyes, opting not to answer.

“Then why do you always search for trouble?” Alexei answered in my stead. Sasha just grinned, flipping him off. His brother chose not to acknowledge him.

“So when are you announcing it to the world?” Vasili asked, his son on his shoulders. “That your last name changed,” he clarified.

“I’m going to hold off until we’re in Sicily,” I answered. “Someone is targeting my shipments and Nonno’s. I’d rather keep it under wraps now.”

“Do you need any help?” Vasili offered, but I shook my head.

“Thank you, but no. Not yet anyhow.”

Matteo rushed to his father, speaking in rushed Italian. Luciano kneeled down, ruffling his son’s hair.

“Son, you just gotta put those girls in their place,” he told him. “Show them who’s the boss.”

“I don’t want to marry Hannah,” he grumbled in English.

A few of us choked. Vasili chuckled and Nico ran a hand across his amused expression.

“There’ll be hell on the horizon,” Nico remarked jokingly.

“Well, what do you want then?” Sasha asked him, his eyes full of that mischief that was bound to rub off on the next generation.

“I just want a pet, not a girl,” Matteo answered seriously and the air filled with laughter.

Spotting Hannah coming his way, Matteo sighed, then bolted outta here.

“You know that will change soon,” I warned Luciano. “Another few years, and he’ll be demanding girls instead of pets.”

“God help me,” he muttered. “Karma won’t be nice to me.”

We watched our women and children chatter, their smiling faces a pleasant change of scenery when Sasha broke the silence.

“So when did you knock up your wife?” he asked. “Before, after, or during her short arranged engagement to Cassio?”

Several groans traveled around. They mainly belonged to his brothers. “Sasha, do you have a goddamn notebook on shit not to ask?”

Sasha just grinned. “Yep, want to buy it?”

“Did you know?” Luciano asked Cassio curiously.

My brother shrugged. “No, but I should have. He was too zeroed in on her, but I thought it was because she shot him and he wanted revenge.”

My head whirled to him. “How in the fuck do you know she shot me?”

“I pulled the surveillances around the club from that night,” Nico chimed in casually. “It was rather fun to watch.”

I flipped him the bird. “You fucker should have given me a heads up.”

My brother-in-law just shrugged. “Consider it your payment for that bet you lost all those years ago. You know, when you didn’t believe I could expand and build a building within a week.”

“Whatever,” I muttered. “If you want to waste your favor on that, go right ahead.”

“So is it then that you decided she was for you?” Sasha questioned. “The day she shot you.”

God, that man and all his questions. “It is none of your business, Sasha. Don’t you have a woman of your own to torment.”

He just grinned, choosing not to answer.

Family and friends. They were a major pain in my ass.

But we couldn’t live without them.

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Chapter Thirty-Eight

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MARGARET

Day after day, week after week, I breathed and consumed everything Luca DiMauro.

My husband. My partner. My confidante.

Life was good. Great in fact.

It had been four weeks since the baby was born. I was so deliriously happy that it terrified me. At this moment, it felt like I had it all. A great husband. A healthy, beautiful baby. My brothers. Nonno. I had a perfect family.

Although there were three little words that made this world turn, they remained unsaid.

I felt loved and protected. Cherished. Yet, just like the heroines in those old movies, I wanted those words. My heart waited and waited, knowing full well I could utter them first.

“I thought the twins were coming tonight,” Cassio questioned.

Aiden shrugged, flicking a glance at my husband who held Penelope. We had all moved on from Cassio’s manipulation, although it didn’t mean they were best friends.

“Are you ever going to give her to me?” he asked instead, glaring at Luca. “I’m her uncle. I’m supposed to spoil her, not you.”

“Ah, no, no, no, Nonno is supposed to spoil our little Penelope.”

“Everyone knows Aunt Áine and Uncle Cassio are the best spoilers,” my cousin mused. As much as I hated to admit it, I feared my brother was right and those two would be the worst. They’d already established a trust fund and showered Penelope with so much jewelry, it rivaled the Queen of

England. And she was not even pushing one month on this planet. It would be years before she could wear any of it. It took everything in me not to roll my eyes every time they walked in the door with another package in their hands.

Luca was even worse. He'd already assigned which of his companies would go to Penelope. Apparently our daughter would be an oil heiress when she came of age. When I protested, he assured me he did the same for his nieces and nephews. It certainly wasn't comforting, but it made me realize I wouldn't win that battle.

"Pfft, Uncle Aiden is the best," my brother drawled, beaming at the baby. "I'm going to teach you how to kill people and–"

A round of half-hearted groans filled the space.

I shook my head at them. If Tyran and Kyran were here, it'd be even worse. Poor Penelope would be passed around like a sack of potatoes. She didn't mind it though. She loved her uncles and Aunt Áine who would give her a playmate soon. She loved Nonno. She loved her daddy the most.

It was our weekly Thursday family dinner at our penthouse with my brothers. Coincidently, it was also Thanksgiving. The holiday season was coming, and for the first time in a long time, I truly looked forward to it.

Aside from the traditional Thanksgiving dinner with turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes, sweet potatoes, and pumpkin pies, I had prepared Nonno's favorites tonight. Spaghetti Bolognese, the late Nonna's recipe. Tiramisu. And of course, Greek salad. Not sure why not Italian, but Nonno insisted on the Greek salad.

Nonno has been staying with us but after the holidays, we'd leave for Sicily. Together.

"Have you gotten any updates on who's seizing your shipments?" Aiden asked. It turned out the attacks on Nonno's business - and I said that in quotations - expanded beyond him and to Luca now.

"No," Luca grumbled, annoyed. "Nico chased all the leads and nothing. It doesn't seem it has anything to do with Benito's death."

"Are you sure it's not Marchetti?" Aiden questioned. "Maybe he holds a grudge after all. Uncle killed his brother. It's hard to get over shit like that. I know I wouldn't. Neither would my brothers."

Cassio and Nonno shook their heads. "He'd have too much to lose. We are a good supplier of goods to him and make most of his profit."

“We were making a nice profit too,” Luca grumbled. “Now we are taking money out of our purse to pay him until we figure out who’s stealing our shit.”

“Why don’t you have a chip installed into all of your shipments and then when someone steals it, you can track it?” All their eyes rose to me, pondering my words as I’d slid cookies onto a plate.

“Shit, that’s a good idea,” Aiden said. “That might make it easier to track, Luca.”

“I have the smartest wife.” Warmth unfurled inside me at his words.

“You sure do,” I agreed, grinning like a fool. Then I remembered, Nonno’s guard wasn’t here. “Is Guido joining us for dinner today?”

Luca shook his head. “No, he wanted to go check on a lady friend.”

Nonno chuckled. Luca and Cassio smirked. “Guido loves the ladies.”

Áine and I rolled our eyes, while Aiden whispered to Penelope that he wouldn’t let any boy close to her. On the inside, I was a melting, sighing mess with the happiness I felt.

It was at that moment that my other two brothers strode into the kitchen like a hurricane. *Thud.*

Happiness gone.

“Jesus, not with the bag of guns again,” I hissed, glaring at both of them with my hands on my hips. “Get that shit off my floor. You can’t have that crap laying around. Penelope will one day crawl, then walk, and she might get a hold of it.”

“She’s only a month old.” Tyran rolled his eyes, lifted the bag and put it on top of the empty counter. It wasn’t a much better place.

Aiden reached for a cookie and shoved it into his mouth. “Fuck, this is good.”

I beamed with pleasure, the bag of weapons forgotten. “Thank you, Brother.”

“You two put that shit in the closet somewhere and up on the highest shelf,” Luca growled. He was a good Pàpa. “If you're gonna keep lugging that crap around, I’m having an extra safe built and you’ll have to lock that up.”

“Geez, you two are so paranoid.”

“I’ll make sure to use those words when you’re parents,” Luca said. “Now, back to my clever wife’s suggestion.”

“What suggestion?” they both asked at the same time.

“Margaret suggested we put tracking devices on all our shipments,” Nonno explained. “It would allow us to track the stolen shipment to the culprit.”

The twins’ gazes flicked my way. “Wow, I didn’t know you had it in you.”

“You two are jackasses,” I snapped and softly smacked Tyran’s hand as he reached for a cookie. “After dinner.”

Nonno observed amused.

“I’ll have to work up the right kind of technology,” Luca pondered as he cradled the baby in his arms. Aiden kept trying to take the baby. Unsuccessfully. “Untraceable ones. It might take me a few weeks to come up with something.”

“That’s a great idea,” Aiden agreed. “Can you start on it now, and I’ll hold my niece as you figure it out?”

“That might take a few months,” Kyran noted. “I doubt DiMauro would allow you to take that baby out of this place.”

Luca pulled a face.

“That is a correct assumption,” he retorted wryly, but he ended up passing a sleeping Penelope to her uncle.

She appeared even smaller in her daddy’s or uncle’s arms.

The oven timer went off and I went to retrieve the second pie out of the oven. My brothers, husband, and Nonno went on to discuss how to make it happen and other business dealings. I tuned in and out of their conversation.

But all the while a soft smile played on my lips. The feeling in my chest was heavy and consuming, but it felt right. It felt good. We had developed a routine. I’d spend my days taking care of my little Penelope, getting Luca’s suits to the dry cleaners and picking them up, making dinner and waiting for him to come home.

He was always home before dinner.

The baby would sleep in her favorite cradle, while we’d go over our day. We could hardly imagine our life before her. At night, Luca insisted on taking care of her. He’d jump out of bed at her first squeal and before it’d even register through my sleeping brain. Luca would expertly change her diaper as he whispered soft Italian words to her and then he’d feed her while rocking her back and forth.

All of us moved to the dining room and took our seats. As my eyes darted around our Thanksgiving table, I couldn’t have been more grateful

for our family.

Luca’s and my eyes met. He winked, his lips curved into a soft smile. God, the way he watched me promised years of happiness ahead of us. This was our second chance since I blew my first one when I shot him. I was sorry for it, although it took some years to get to the sorrow part.

If there was a happily ever after, this felt peculiarly close to it.

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Chapter Thirty-Nine

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LUCA

Nonno saved a boy, but it was Margaret and our little girl who saved the man.

I never thought it possible to love a tiny human being so much. Yet, as I rocked my daughter back and forth in the rocking chair, surrounded by pink everywhere I looked, it was the closest to heaven I had ever felt.

It was Christmas Eve and I fed Penelope a bottle. She was a colicky baby, waking up multiple times at night. I always got up to soothe her, sometimes to feed her, and I held her until she fell back asleep. It took a lot of convincing but Margaret finally saw the logic in me doing it. She had her all day. I had her at night.

The soft noises she made as I fed her the bottle, her eyes open and trusting on me, had my chest grow full.

“It’s Christmas Eve, Penelope,” I whispered in a soft voice. “Not a creature is stirring, not even a mouse. We have to hurry up and finish the bottle, burp, then go to sleep. St. Nick is coming with gifts.”

A soft chuckle came from the door and Penelope’s head turned towards the sound.

Margaret leaned against the doorframe of our daughter’s room, dressed in her little silky nightgown, her stomach bump non-existent.

It has been almost two months since she gave birth. I’d never admit it, but it fucking scared me. When I saw blood trickling down her legs, the panic at the possible loss of the baby, and maybe her, almost unraveled me. The doctors assured me that those kinds of complications weren’t so unusual, but as they cut my wife open, fear was like acid on my tongue.

It offered a taste of what my life would be should someone take them away. I'd never let that happen.

"You need sleep," I scolded her softly. "Remember, the night shift is mine."

She rolled her eyes playfully as she padded barefoot across the white plush rug full of pink polka dots.

"I couldn't resist checking up on you two," she murmured, her fingers softly brushing our daughter's raven curls. She looked like her mother, but she had my eyes. Her eyes drooped and she pushed the nipple out with her tongue. It was her sign she was done. Setting the bottle down on the table, I wrapped my arms around my wife's slim waist and pulled her onto my lap, as I kept our baby pressed against my chest, patting her back to burp her.

"She's beautiful," I stated proudly. "Just like her mommy."

Margaret's hands came around me, her fingers curling into my strands. "All babies are beautiful."

"Not like my princess," I protested jokingly, keeping my voice a whisper.

Margaret's beautiful lips curved up. "She's extra beautiful because she has her daddy's eyes. And probably his temperament."

"That's right, she's perfect," I agreed.

If she only knew the lengths I'd go for the two of them.

Nonno was still here with us. The threat hadn't eased. Actually, it has expanded to include attacks on his shipments. So to keep them all safe, I'd suggested we stay in New York a little bit longer. To my surprise, it was my wife who needed convincing. She itched to go back to Sicily.

It was only when Nonno agreed to stay if Margaret stayed that she caved. For his safety.

"My da was the same, you know," Margaret whispered. When I looked at her confused, she explained. "My brothers said that he always took care of me at night and sang me to sleep."

Guilt reared its ugly head at her words. It was the remainder of my secret, one that would cost me my wife and child. I could never let her find out.

"I'm not much of a singer, but I can give it a try," I suggested in a low voice. All the while a tiny voice in my head warned.

"Nah, your stories seem to keep Penelope enthralled." Her blue eyes rose to meet mine, and I watched all the different emotions pass through

them. My wife's eyes seemed even lighter tonight with white snow clouds and flurries lighting up the night. It'd be a cold Christmas. "Is that what your mom did? Tell you stories?"

A long silence followed and we both focused on our daughter. Secrets, ghosts, and guilt danced in circles all around us, probably taking bets which would cave first. A silent prayer whispered in my mind, hoping to allow my dark secret to go to grave with me. God knew I'd taken my best shot at keeping the veil over my sin, hiding it in a dark corner.

"Yes, she'd tell me stories. From what little I remember. Cassio remembers more and he said in the beginning her stories were happy, but then they turned dark. *The Night Before Christmas* was the only one that remained with her until she died. It was the only one I remember."

"Was she… How did she die?" Margaret asked in a small voice.

"Suicide." Cassio found her and he forbade me from seeking her out. I went in search of her regardless. Her lifeless body lay slumped in the bathtub full with red liquid. Water and her blood drowning her sorrows. Her dark hair was soaked, floating on the red surface.

Drip. Drip. Drip. "My father finally pushed her too far."

It only took one bullet to end her life.

Margaret's fingers tightened around me. "I'm sorry. He was a bastard."

"I'm sorry too." She thought I spoke about my father, but I meant it about hers. He was a good man. I might have been a kid when I shot him, but it gave me no reprieve in my guilt.

"After you killed your father, a lot of his enemies came after you." Her voice was a faint whisper. She was right, the blow back was bad, but it was worth it to protect my sister.

"Don't worry, they won't come after you and our baby." I'd die before I let anything happen to them. I was in this deep. So deep that my hands trembled each time I thought about a life without them. There was no life without them.

"Luca."

"Hmmm."

"There was something I've never told you," she whispered. "Something I've never told anyone."

A feeling in my chest grew heavy and I wondered if a shoe would finally drop.

“Your father killed my da.” Drip. Drip. Drip. “I didn’t remember it. Not until I ran into you in Temptation. It made me hate you. That your father took mine away. That you were a reminder of what I’d lost.”

Drip. Drip. Drip.

I couldn’t ever let her find out this secret.

Margaret pressed her face tightly against my neck. The three of us held tightly, our baby in peaceful sleep, offering strength I never knew I needed.

The words of *The Night Before Christmas* left my lips on nothing more than a breath and my family held tightly against my chest.

Everything was right with the world as I rocked back and forth with the two most important women in my arms.

As we lay our daughter down in her crib, and I scooped my wife into my arms to carry her to our bed, I should have known nothing stays buried forever.

Instead, I dropped to my knees, pushed her short silky nightgown up, removed her panties, and parted my wife’s legs wide, her glistening pussy making all reason leave my brain and run to my cock. The scent of her arousal filled my lungs, making my head swim more than any alcohol or drug ever could. My chest heaved with the need to taste her.

I jerked her hips forward, burying my head between her thighs, until her pussy was on my face. She was my heaven and my hell. She was my kingdom come, my queen.

I lapped at her pussy and got lost in her ocean scent.

“Holy shit,” she breathed, her fingers fisting in my hair. I ate her like I was a starving man. I sucked and licked her. Her back arched off the bed, grinding against my face, and I relished in every roll of her hips. Her every moan. Every whimper.

The flesh of her cunt was swollen and her juices flowed in a torrent as I lapped at her like my life depended on it. I shoved two fingers inside her and she moaned, rocking herself on my hand.

“Luca.” My name on her lips was the sweetest music. Her scent soaked into my soul, drowning me in it. I drew her clit between my lips and suckled. She orgasmed, violently and hard. Her fingers threaded my hair and pulled, her body jerking as she came on my face.

I stared up at her, ravenous, and my cock grew hard in my pajama pants. Our eyes locked, her cheeks flushed and her gaze hooded.

She licked her lips. “I need you inside me.”

“It’s only been eight weeks.” This would be enough. I could wait another few weeks. After all, I waited years for her.

“The doctor said six weeks only,” she breathed. “Please, Luca.” Uncertainty crossed her eyes and her hands came to her lower stomach, over the scar. “Unless–”

I took her hands and gently tugged them away. Taking the hem of her bunched up baby doll nightgown and pulling it over her head, I lowered my gaze to her stomach. Then brought my lips to the scar.

“Don’t hide from me, Margaret,” I murmured as my lips brushed against it. “Your scars are beautiful. Your soul is beautiful. Your heart is beautiful.” My mouth trailed up her stomach and to her perky nipples. “You are beautiful. Don’t ever hide from me.”

I took her nipple into my mouth and sucked, scraping my teeth over her sensitive buds. Fuck, I needed her pussy strangling my dick right-the-fuck now. My tip found her entrance and a tremble rolled down my spine. The wet heat surrounded me as I pushed inside her.

We both panted together, our gazes full of lust held as I tunneled inside her. “Fuck, you feel so good.”

“Then start fucking me, Luca,” she hissed, all patience gone. “I got the shot, so no need to worry about getting me pregnant.”

Madonna mia. Her sassy mouth always made an appearance at the most peculiar times. But I indulged her. I’d always indulge her. I’d give her everything. If she asked for my life, she’d get it. If she asked for my balls, they were hers.

I thrust gently, teasing her, not filling her fully. “God, Luca. Please, more.”

“I want to fuck you hard,” I told her.

She was dripping wet, her juices trickling down her thighs.

“I can take it,” she panted. “Please. Please, fuck me.”

I slid deeper and a shiver wracked her body as I drove deep. A groan vibrated through my chest and my control slipped. I fucked her, rutting her like an animal. My mind warned me to slow down, but I was out of control. I craved her, needed her, and wanted to get as deep inside her as possible.

“Fuck, mia bella,” I growled against her ear. “Am I hurting you?”

“More, Luca. More.”

My balls tightened. She matched my every need. My every fantasy.

“My dirty wife is so fucking eager, taking my cock,” I praised. “Your pussy wants my cum, doesn’t it?”

She whimpered, her pussy clenching around my dick like a vise.

I slid my fingers around her, between her ass cheeks and my thumb found her hole there. I circled it with gentle pressure. “I’m going to take that too,” I rasped in her ear.

“Oh, fuck.” Her back arched and her insides shuddered around my dick.

Fuck! She liked that.

I pushed the tip of my thumb inside as I continued thrusting. Her pussy clamped down on me, strangling me as she convulsed around my cock and bucking against me.

My orgasm rushed over me, stealing my breath from my lungs as my cum shot into her cunt.

We climaxed, our bodies trembling together and both of us breathing hard.

“God, sex with you is like dying and coming back refreshed,” she murmured sleepily, and I couldn’t help a choked laugh as I pulled her even closer to me.

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

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Chapter Forty

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MARGARET

Christmas dinner at my uncle's house was a tradition.

One thing I knew for sure. It'd be my last dinner with my mother. Aside from that day Mother ambushed us in front of Luca's restaurant, I hadn't seen her yet. And I certainly didn't want her around my daughter.

I'd never let her utter the words to Penelope that I had to hear growing up. That I was worthless. That she should have drowned me when I was born. Those weren't the words any girl should hear, never mind from your own mother.

Ignoring her, I took a spot at the table. Once we were all piled around the large dining room table, the room decorated in red and gold with a large Christmas tree blinking its lights happily. It didn't match the mood at this obnoxiously large mahogany table that could seat a party of fifty.

There was definitely no cheer at this table.

Nico Morrelli and his family were here. Cassio and Áine were here. My brothers. Nonno. And then there was my mother, the woman who hadn't stepped foot in Uncle's house in decades. But she was family, Uncle Jack said, so he couldn't refuse her.

I sat across the table from my mother as she watched me with a sneer on her lips and hate in her eyes. I'd never understood why she hated me so much.

Like she couldn't stand to look at me. Yet, she insisted on attending this dinner despite the fact she never came around to Uncle Jack's.

"What kind of daughter doesn't visit her mother?" she questioned. "I bet if your da was here, you'd refuse to leave my goddamn house."

My eyes flickered to the wall where the clock showed five o'clock. She literally made it ten minutes after we sat down for our holiday dinner before she started her harping.

"Yeah, but he's not here," I said, keeping a rein on my temper, but my voice shook. "And we have you to thank for that. Besides, it's not your house. It's Da's home. My brother's home."

Luca's hand came to my thigh under the table and squeezed gently.

"Now, Margaret, you cannot blame your mother for it," my aunt chimed in, trying to bring peace to the table. God, I wished she'd just shut her mouth. That woman would side with the devil before me. It didn't matter. She didn't matter. "From what I understand, that wretched Marchetti killed your father. Either way, your father is gone. If Áine and I could put the past with the King family behind us, you can put your past with your mother behind you."

The whole table stiffened at the mention of Benito. Áine brought her juice to her lips with a slightly trembling hand. If Cassio's looks could kill, her mother would have been dead on the spot, and suddenly I liked my brother-in-law a lot more.

My eyes never wavered from Mother. I didn't like the look in her eyes. It was too smug. It spoke of retribution.

It was Guido, Nonno's guard, who broke the tension and interrupted my stare down with the mother of the century.

"Do Americans always eat ham for Christmas?" he wondered.

The next twenty minutes were spent discussing traditional dishes in the States versus in Italy or Ireland. I tuned it all out, trying to ignore the anger running through my veins. I'd kept the secret for so long but now, I felt it bubbling inside me, threatening to spill it from my lips. My mind screamed, 'You killed Da as much as Benito,' but I knew it'd hurt my brothers. Tyran and Kyran especially.

Christmas day was hardly the time to spill bloody secrets like that.

Penelope stirred, her hungry pitch breaking through the dining room and I shot up. It was exactly the reprieve I needed. Away from my mother's glares and away from the ghosts that haunted me.

"I'll go feed her."

"I can come with you," Luca offered but I shook my head.

"No, stay and eat. I'll be right back."

Heading out of the dining room, I paused in the hallway. Usually, I'd make my way upstairs to my old bedroom, but I wasn't even sure if it was right to roam the manor. It didn't feel like home anymore.

Luca feels like home, I realized. *Luca and Penelope **are** home*.

Deciding against my old bedroom, I headed for the library. Taking a seat behind the six foot tall divider that had an oriental theme of Ching Ming painted on it, I sat down on the little loveseat and settled with little Penelope on my breast.

My eyes lowered down on my daughter and my chest warmed. Happiness. This was sheer happiness. Luca fed our baby pre-pumped bottles, but I preferred to breastfeed. It made me feel connected to her. I'd enjoy it for a bit longer.

Her dark curly hair bounced off her forehead, and I gently pushed it away as she latched on to my nipple and started feeding. Her hazel eyes that reminded me of her daddy slowly started drooping as she sucked in rhythmic movements.

I stared at the vivid painting of the divider. Character roofs of Japanese prayer homes. Little fishing boats. Those cute Wagasa umbrellas.

Barely five minutes into the baby's feeding, the door opened. I was just about to open my mouth when my mother's voice stopped me.

"Now doesn't the world work in mysterious ways?" There was a hint of sarcasm in Mother's voice. "Long time no see, Luca King."

I stiffened. Why was Luca with my mother? And what did she mean by long time no see. Luca never gave any inclination that he knew mother.

"Cut the bullshit, Maeve, and tell me what you want!" Foreboding rolled down my spine. "We both know you're not the philosophical type."

My husband's tone was unmistakable. I should announce myself. Tell them I was here and tell my mother to leave Luca alone. But something held me back.

"What? Keeping tabs on me?" The hopeful tone of Mother's was unmistakable. "I kept tabs on you too," she purred. I shifted slightly, peeking between the two panels of the divider. "You look just like him. Benito." Her red painted fingernail trailed down his tie. It made me sick to my stomach. "I bet you fuck like him too."

Luca didn't push her away, but he took a step back, putting some distance between them. Mother's high-pitched laugh followed, causing

Penelope to startle and I immediately soothed her, placing my palm on her little head.

“Shhh.” It was more movement of my lips and light rocking of my body than a sound I made.

“I won’t repeat myself again,” Luca gritted through clenched teeth. “What. Do. You. Want?”

“Have you told her?”

Tell me what, I wanted to ask, but I kept my lips pressed tightly. I wanted to know what was going on. It seemed Luca kept secrets from me.

“Her Da was everything to Margaret.” Mother continued when he said nothing. “I swear that girl came out of me and wanted to suck on her father’s breasts, not mine. Girls are useless in our world, you know. Their pussies are merely currency. Something to trade. Something to use. We have no power except through the men who want those cunts. Margaret stole that power from me the minute she was born, and I’ve hated her ever since.”

“Maybe she preferred her father over you because she sensed what a rotten bitch you are,” Luca deadpanned.

Mother threw her head back, her dark curls bouncing. She might be in her fifties, but she had so much work done she looked like she was in her thirties.

“It wasn’t me who shot her father though.”

I swallowed, ignoring the tremor rolling through me. I didn’t like to think about Benito shooting Da. The images of him laying in the pool of his own blood, terror in his gaze.

The piercing pain in my chest radiated, and I glanced down to my baby girl. I wanted to make sure she wasn’t feeling it too. I wanted to spare her all the pain and cruelty of this world. And the underworld had pain and suffering galore to dish out.

“I thought that would silence you,” Mother bragged with a self-satisfied smug expression on her face. “Trust me on this, Luca. If Margaret learned it was you who shot her precious Da, you’d be history before you could say *wait*.”

What? For a moment, my heart forgot to beat and the world stopped spinning.

Shock rolled through me, immediately followed by pain that slashed my heart into two pieces. Then four. Until it felt like a million knives plunged

into my chest, cutting off my oxygen supply.

Luca killed Da. Luca killed Da. Oh my God, Luca killed Da.

I had told him what had happened that day, everything I remembered and he remained silent.

“I was a kid when that happened,” Luca hissed. “Following my father’s orders. A father who didn’t hesitate beating his sons within an inch of their life. What is your fucking excuse, Maeve?”

Mother took two steps towards my husband who remained immobile, his face a blank mask. No regret. No sorrow. Nothing.

“State what you want or I’ll finish you too,” he threatened in an impassive voice. But I could hear the cold tenor ringing through the air. A shiver ghosted through me.

Who was this man I’d slept next to every night? Who was this man that held our baby and rocked her to sleep?

Mother cackled. Just like the witch she was. A beautiful, but cold and mean witch.

“If her brothers get a wind of what you did to their father, they’ll tear you to pieces.” She tapped her fingers pensively against her chin. “There’d be no saving you. Margaret will always be their precious sister, but that bastard daughter of yours–”

She never got to finish her statement because Luca’s hand wrapped around my mother’s throat.

“She’s not a bastard,” he growled. “And anyone, fucking anyone, tries to take them from me,” he threatened, a dark expression on his face, “and I’ll end them. Brother or no brother. Mother or no mother. I’ll fucking kill you all if you lay a finger on my daughter or my wife.”

Luca had to be squeezing hard because Mother’s eyes bulged and her face turned red. But that didn’t stop her from curving her lips.

“But the icing on the cake is Marchetti,” she hissed, refusing to give up. My heart drummed in my ears, and I desperately tried to calm it down, scared I’d miss a single word. “You let the head of one of the largest criminal European organizations take the blame for my husband’s death.” God, I wasn’t sure who I hated more at this moment. Luca or my mother. “So Callahan killed Marchetti’s brother in order to avenge Margaret’s father. How do you think Marchetti will react when he finds out one of the families running his prime territory in his home country set him up?”

She paused for dramatics.

Luca's fury burned my skin and he wasn't even looking at me. My mother was stupid to ignore his anger. But then I was stupid to trust him.

"I'd consider your next words carefully, Maeve," Luca said, his voice calm. Too calm. "Because they might be your last ones."

Something shifted in the air, but my mother was too stupid to notice. She continued with her stupid, big mouth.

"You're not worried about Marchetti, are you?" She kept cackling, getting on my nerves. "Because you already used Margaret to settle that betrayal. You sold your daughter to him."

He what?

My eyes burned with anger and betrayal. And tears. "You promised your daughter for his son."

God, this was how heartbreak and betrayal felt. So much for my second chance. My happily never after seemed to be my destiny. My heart ached and I bit into my lip to ensure no sobs slipped through my lips. I couldn't let them see me.

Luca must have loosened his grip because Mother took a deep breath in, but she was too dumb to stop there.

"I can't wait to see what my daughter thinks of the deal you've made." Mother smiled self-satisfied, thinking she got one over on him. "You think she'll despise you more than me?"

His jaw ticked. His expression turned murderous.

"Not to worry, handsome. Marchetti learned who set him up. He knows your family pulled one over on him and he decided to get even. Your daughter is no longer an adequate payment. Why do you think your shipments are missing? He wants life for a life. Your kid's life perhaps. Karma is a bitch, isn't it?"

My brain barely had time to register what happened next. Luca pulled a knife from his jacket. A door opened behind him, but Luca was too far gone. In one swift move, he sliced my mother's throat. Everything but my heart went still. I stared through the crack as my mother slumped from his grip and onto the floor, blood pooling around her on the hardwood floor.

The silence that followed was ominous. Mother's dead eyes stared at me, watching through the crack.

Drip… drip… drip.

A chill passed through me as Luca grabbed a handkerchief out of his pocket and cleaned out his knife, then put it away without a flicker of

emotion.

“What the fuck, Luca?” Cassio’s growl reverberated off the walls of the library. “Why did you kill your wife’s mother?”

Luca’s response was as cold as the look in his eyes. It reminded me of Alaskan winter nights. “She was annoying me.”

Strained silence reigned across the room and I got a sense Cassio was attempting to control his own temper. And all the while, I sat frozen, feeding my baby.

Our baby.

Mother’s gurgling sounds slowly faded. Strangely, her death didn’t strike me as badly as learning that Luca killed my father. Or used our baby in his negotiations with the Marchetti family.

Betrayal cut through my chest, a fresh and burning wound. I hadn’t realized I was crying until I tasted salt on my tongue. My throat tightened. My heart hurt.

Luca King was the biggest mistake of my life.

The last name change couldn’t erase his sins.

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Chapter Forty-One

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LUCA

"Are you fucking insane?" Cassio hissed, closing the door behind him.

"Actually, I'm quite sane. Thanks for asking."

Cassio's eyes rested on the dead body of my mother-in-law. This had to be the icing on the goddamn cake. Me killing my mother-in-law. I finally got the woman I loved. I had my own family. My little Penelope. And then this witch tried to tear it all apart.

Cassio circled the body, then glared at me.

"Why did you kill her?" My brother's voice was quiet, but I didn't mistake that for calm. He was fucking pissed. Not that I gave two shits about it. "And if you tell me some shit about her annoying you, I'll kill you myself because you're annoying me."

"She threatened to tell Margaret that I killed her father," I said. Fuck, my chest tightened each time I thought about Margaret finding out that little detail of my past. It all led to this current predicament. And me making a deal with Marchetti.

But it was either that or they would have killed Margaret her first week in Italy. Those two men on the plane were sent by Marchetti. That man didn't forgive nor forget. He settled scores. It was the reason he was one of the most feared men in the world.

"Goddamn it, Luca," he growled quietly. "You should have told her yourself. Explained you were just a kid, used by our fucking father." Cassio ran a hand through his hair, then sent me another glower. "You need to start thinking before acting."

He was right, of course. But fuck it. The woman threatened to take out my family. And then there was the Marchetti comment. Nobody but Nonno, Marchetti, and I knew about the deal. Not even Cassio.

So how in the fuck did her mother know about it?

“The bitch deserved what was coming to her,” I said, hiding my panic.

“Maybe, but not in Callahan’s home,” he grumbled. “Damn it, what the fuck do we do now?”

Maeve had dug her own fucking grave. She shouldn’t have talked shit about Margaret and my daughter. Threatening my family.

“Make it look like a suicide,” I suggested apathetic. I itched to go searching for Margaret. Panic already started to settle into my bones. She was breastfeeding Penelope, but if she got the wind of it, she’d leave me.

“Seriously?” Cassio let out a sardonic breath. “We’re gonna tell them she sliced her own throat. That’s the best you can come up with.”

Okay, so not exactly my best thinking but fuck. The woman was a bitch. Nobody would miss her. I had to find my wife and baby. I had to make sure they were fine.

“This will start a war.”

Cassio thought I was worried about a goddamn war. When somehow the world knew about my deal with Marchetti. Nobody should have known about it. Of course, I wouldn’t have married off my daughter to his son. Neither of his sons. But I needed time to work out how to get the fuck out of that deal. My last resort was to end the entire Marchetti family before my daughter turned of age.

“Fuck war,” I said, shrugging my one shoulder. “She threatened my wife and daughter. If Callahan wants it, he’ll get it.” Cassio sighed, then picked up his phone and called Guido.

A couple of minutes later, a knock sounded. I went to the door and opened it slightly. When I saw Nonno standing in the corridor with both of his guards and Guido, I was ready to pull my hair out. Without any time to waste, I ushered him in.

“Ah, nipote,” Nonno grumbled, giving me a look. “What happened?”

His eyes scanned the room sharply before focusing on me. “Luca, my son, you’re crazy,” he muttered. “What has she done to make you kill her?”

I grimaced. “She threatened Margaret and our baby,” I said. All of us looked at the dead bitch. “And she threatened to give Margaret’s life to Marchetti in exchange for his dead brother’s.” Silence followed, Maeve’s

lifeless eyes staring at us. “She knew about my deal with Marchetti and arranging a marriage between our families.”

“What deal?” Cassio gritted. “And arranged marriage between who?”

“Little Penelope and Marchetti’s son,” Nonno answered. When Cassio gave him a look, Nonno waved his hand. “*Madonna mia*, you have gotten too serious since you got married, Cassio. The Marchettis are a powerful family. The most powerful one in Europe, and one of the biggest players in the criminal world. And yet, they are untouchable by NATO, Interpol, DEA, FBI, CIA. Why do you think that is?”

Cassio’s lips thinned in displeasure. “We don’t have any of those agencies after us either,” he snapped.

Nonno refused to be deterred. “You have the DEA after you all the time. Interpol too. Just because they’ve not been able to stick anything on you doesn’t mean they’re not watching.” When Cassio said nothing, Nonno continued, “Marchetti is not even on their radar, and they’re biggest product is human trafficking.”

“See, that right there,” Cassio hissed. “That’s the piece that bothers me.”

“With a marriage alliance, we can bring that to an end,” Nonno declared.

I didn’t bother correcting him that my daughter would never make it down the aisle to make that alliance. I just wanted to save her and Margaret’s life.

Nonno’s bodyguard, Guido, stepped forward. His expression struck me as odd but I chalked it up to this fucked up night. Nobody liked seeing a murdered woman, but this one deserved it.

“I can slip through the window with the body,” Guido offered. “Then make it look like an accident.”

Cassio’s eyes flicked to the fireplace and I followed his gaze. A fire burned steadily. “Burn her?” he suggested.

Guido’s expression darkened. “That will stink and Callahan will recognize the smell of a burning body.”

“Or we wrap up the body and Guido slips out the window,” I suggested, my eyes traveling over the room and spotting a large blanket.

We all shared glances and a terse nod.

“We need to explain her absence,” Cassio said.

“We’ll just say we saw her slip out the door,” I grumbled. “It’s technically true. We just won’t say she slipped out the door dead.”

Ten minutes later, it was as if nothing happened in the library.
No evidence of murder. No evidence of betrayal.
But the secrets hid in corners, remaining with me.

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Chapter Forty-Two

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MARGARET

My heart froze to ice and shattered into a million pieces as I waited for them to leave.

Air swished out of my lungs, my eyes still on the spot where my mother lay just mere minutes ago. She was taken out.

Just like garbage.

Yet, I felt no sadness about my mother's death. She deserved what she got.

But it was the act of my husband being the one to slice her throat that bothered me. The revelation that he was the one to kill my father. Luca lied to me. The final nail in the coffin of our marriage was that Marchetti was after my daughter.

I glanced at my baby girl who was still feeding, her eyes droopy, as my brain worked vigorously. I couldn't stay here. I wanted to leave right here and now. I didn't want to see Luca, nor his brother. Nobody.

Yet, I couldn't just get up and leave. Not yet.

A heavy sigh swished out of my lungs.

"We're gonna have to run, Penelope," I whispered, the rubber band around my heart threatening to snap. "Just like old times."

Shit, why did the idea of living without Luca hurt so badly?

Penelope cooed her answer, and I imagined she was probably protesting. She loved being held by her Pàpa. Luca would wake up at night and feed her the milk I pumped, whispering words in Italian as he rocked her back to sleep.

I pressed my baby tighter to my chest while it felt like my heart was cracking open.

The metallic taste of blood filled my mouth. A tremor started in my hands. The shadows danced through the room. Past. Present. Future.

My lungs tightened and every breath hurt, like ice chips against my skin. Tears blurred my vision and one lone tear rolled down my cheek and onto my baby's forehead.

With trembling fingers, I wiped it clean.

A strangled gasp escaped me, and I swallowed before I found my voice.

"I won't let you forget your Pàpa," I promised softly. "But we can't stay, my baby."

IT WAS ALMOST midnight when we got home.

Luca had his hand around me, while he carried our baby in her carrier with the other. He was seemingly relaxed, but the tension in his shoulders didn't escape me. The whole ride home, he gripped the steering wheel, his eyes sharp on the road and rearview mirror.

It was only once we entered his penthouse that the tension seeped out of him.

Penelope slept soundly in her carrier as we made our way to the baby's room. Luca gently took her out of her seat then changed her diaper and swapped her clothes with her sleepers as I watched them, memorizing this moment. I didn't know how many more we'd have.

Penelope woke up, cooing and smiling at her Pàpa.

He settled into the rocking chair, our baby secured in his big, strong arms.

"Mamma should go to sleep, shouldn't she, Poppy," Luca whispered softly. The way he gazed at our daughter, with so much love, it was hard to believe he was a killer. A manipulator.

His gaze lifted at me and our gazes locked, burning. Time lagged in slow motion, touching my skin like a blazing sun, leaving me hot.

"Go rest, Wife," he urged, flashing me his grin. "You've been quiet all evening. You must be tired."

Without a word, I nodded and headed into our bedroom. I took a quick shower, then slipped into bed. I lay on my back in our bed, staring at the ceiling and I listened to the soft words Luca whispered to our daughter.

The door opened and Luca strode into our room. He unclasped his watch and put it on the dresser. His cufflinks came next. His suit jacket and vest followed. Then he worked on loosening his tie and slipped it off his neck. Then, he started on his shirt buttons. Belt. Shoes. Luca undressing was the sexiest thing I had ever seen. Yet right now, none of it mattered. I wanted the truth about what he had done - with my father and with our daughter.

I watched as he disappeared into the bathroom and listened to the steady run of the shower. So many thoughts swarmed my mind, I had a hard time organizing them all into a thought that made sense.

The door to the bathroom opened and he stepped out wearing nothing but black boxers.

I finally broke the silence. “Is something wrong?”

Last chance to come clean. *Please come clean.*

“Business stuff,” he answered as he flung himself on the bed beside me. He lay on his back and stared up at the ceiling with empty eyes. Darkness swallowed the room, and it touched my soul.

My heartbeat faltered and disappointment washed over me. It wasn’t as if I expected him to tell me everything.

Still, I hoped.

A year ago, I detested him. Now, I loved him so much that it hurt. Nothing like going from one extreme to another. But staying here, with him, was not an option. Except, the thought of leaving him hurt so goddamn much.

However, losing my baby would be a thousand times worse. I’d have to disappear - my daughter and me. The two of us would leave all this behind.

He pulled me closer to him, enveloping me in his scent and despite the events that occurred this evening, my body responded to his touch. I should push him away, start screaming, except that would alert him.

Besides, if I leave him, I’d need this. For me. For the lonely nights that were coming.

My palm came to rest on his chest, then stroked it softly. There was something wrong with me, because even with what I had just learned, touching him sent a shudder through me.

Luca rolled me over and pulled me down on top of him. In one swift move, he pulled my nightgown off me and ripped my panties, leaving me naked.

“You keep ripping my panties, I’m going to be left without,” I breathed as my heart cracked inch by inch.

His dark chuckle filled the space. His hand lightly stroked my back, kissing me. Our tongues tangled. He made a wild noise in his throat and his eyes closed. His tongue moved faster, harder, twirling with mine.

I surrendered to the kiss and to his touch but those ghosts lurked.

His hands palmed my breasts, his thumbs stroking my nipples. A soft, whimpering sound escaped my lips. My nails dug into his shoulder, holding on to him. Just for a while longer.

His mouth replaced one of his thumbs on my nipple and I hissed out a breath. His teeth scraped my nipple. Hard. My back arched at the sensation. The pulse between my legs throbbed.

As if he felt every sensation swimming through my veins, his hand traveled down my stomach, lower and lower, until he parted my legs. The evidence of my arousal trickled down my inner thighs. His finger brushed over my clit and a moan filled our bedroom.

He flipped us over, his body hovering over mine. His finger swept from my clit to my entrance, then he brought it to his lips and licked it clean.

“You taste exquisite,” he grunted. “My addiction.”

His mouth traveled down my body, until he reached my parted legs. He pushed his palms below my butt and lifted my hips up, then pressed his mouth on my throbbing flesh. His eyes were on me, possessive and hungry as he licked me. From my clit to my entrance.

He dipped his tongue into my entrance and my hands came to his hair, gripping and holding on to him. I needed more of him. So much more. His tongue moved in and out of me, tongue fucking me.

My thighs closed over him, my torso grinding against his mouth as he groaned, eating me out. His groan vibrated to the core of me, my insides quivering with anticipation of the pleasure to come.

“I want to eat you every day,” he murmured, pushing my legs further apart. “Until I die, Wife.”

His fingers gently opened my lips, licking me from entrance to clit and back again. His growl of satisfaction vibrated through me and my body shuddered ready for release. Then his tongue dipped deeper into my

entrance. My toes curled from the intense sensations and my back arched off the bed.

“Oh my God,” I moaned.

He ran a rough hand down my leg, then lifted it over his shoulder. I ran my fingers through his hair, grinding against his tongue. My hips moved of their own will, hungry for more. Needing more of him. He tongue fucked me. *In and out. In and out.*

Each time his tongue pushed deeper inside me words spilled from my lips. Unintelligible. Gaelic. English.

My eyes rolled back in my head. My ears buzzed. My blood lit up, electrifying my body. Sparks burned.

The pressure exploded, and I came so hard, my ears rang. I struggled to catch my breath, that sweet ache throbbing between my thighs and a languid sensation filling my body.

“Look at me.” His words came through the buzzing in my ears and my eyes fluttered open. It was only then that I realized his hand covered my mouth and I bit into it. He pulled his hand from my mouth, and by the teeth marks, I’d bitten down hard when I came.

His breathing matched my own and his gaze was filled with something soft and dark.

He nipped at my lip.

“I’m going to fuck you now,” he growled.

I shivered. “Please.” This man betrayed me in the worst way and still, his touch was everything to me.

He deepened the kiss with a hot glide of his tongue. Heat bloomed between my legs, and I needed him inside me with a desperate ache. In the corner of my mind, I wondered how I would ever survive without his touch for the rest of my life.

Without *him*.

The feel of his skin against mine felt like a blanket of comfort. I moved my mouth down his jaw, then to his throat and a shudder rolled through him as I sucked on his pulse.

He pushed into me without a warning and I gasped, digging my nails into his shoulders and arching my back to take him deeper.

A rumble came from his throat, his mouth nipping on my neck.

“You were made for me,” he rasped as he slid out of me, leaving the tip of his cock at my entrance and then thrust back in. He hit a spot so deep, so

intense, that I burned like a match from the inside. “Every single inch of you.”

His pelvis ground against my clit, both of us breathing heavy. He was relentless when he fucked. Pure, unfiltered pleasure started to build.

“Never leave,” he grunted. “Fucking ever.”

My heart revolted at the idea of leaving him but my mind was already made up.

“*Come inside me*,” I pleaded instead, unable to answer his command. He pressed his face into my neck, fucking me mercilessly. He hit a spot so deep inside me that it took no time to reach the edge.

“I want more babies,” he growled, his hips thrusting through my orgasm and my insides clenching around him. “I want it all. With you.”

It was stupid. I just had a baby. It was risky. It was how it all started to begin with. How I ended up here with him. And yet, I needed that.

Just one more time. One last time.

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Chapter Forty-Three

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LUCA

"Let me know when you're back, Luca," Marchetti said in a cool voice. "I want to introduce my sons to your daughter."

A growl vibrated in my chest. I thought it was wise to make the wedding arrangement between our children, but now I wasn't so sure. The thought of any boy close to my daughter didn't bode well.

"She's an infant." My voice was cold and my throat burned.

"No matter. It will be good for them to get acquainted."

A few more words and I ended the call, finding Nonno's and Cassio's eyes on me.

The plan was to head back to Sicily any day now, yet I didn't know whether it was the right move. Especially after what I'd learned from Maeve yesterday.

"What does your gut tell you?" Nonno asked. I gave him and Cassio the full story and the words that had been volleyed between my wife's mother and me. "Is it safe for Margaret and Penelope there?"

That was the goddamn problem. I just got off the phone with Marchetti, and I still couldn't fucking tell whether he was happy to talk to me or not.

"I don't think he knows it was Benito who started the war between the two families," I remarked. "With my help."

"A twelve-year-old boy," Nonno protested. "It wasn't your fault. If anything, it was my fault. I should have protected you better. I should have protected my Penelope better."

"We all did the best we could," Cassio grunted.

“Cassio is right,” I agreed. “We all failed someone. It’s what we do now that counts. If something happens to Margaret and–”

“Nothing will happen,” Nonno said in a stronger voice than I’d heard in a long time. “If we have to go to war with Marchetti, we will. First, let’s capture the traitor who keeps stealing our shipments. My gut tells me it’s not Marchetti.”

“I agree.” The issue was who’d dare steal from us. There weren’t too many of our affiliations that would dare. It left me without any suspects. “I’ve built a non-traceable device with Morrelli’s help. They are going into our shipments as we speak. With the next one that disappears, we should be able to trace it.”

“Bene.” Nonno’s eyes darted around. “When is Guido coming back?”

I shrugged. “Doesn’t he work for you, Nonno?” I mused.

Ten minutes later, Nonno and I headed back to my penthouse while Cassio rushed to his wife.

THE MOMENT I walked through the penthouse door, I knew something was wrong.

It was too quiet. There was no baby stuff scattered around. No laughter. No ‘hello daddy’ greeting while Margaret held our infant. *Nothing.*

My chest tightened and my heart thumped so hard.

Had Marchetti snatched them? The thought turned my blood to ice.

I headed for the kitchen. It was empty. A cold cup of coffee sat on the kitchen island alongside a bottle with curdled milk. Alert shot through me. Margaret hated leaving bottles with milk sitting around. She was paranoid about germs.

“Margaret,” I called out quietly, but I knew in the pit of my stomach she wasn’t here. I retrieved my gun from my holster, and fuck if my hands didn’t shake.

Keeping quiet, I headed for the bedrooms. First, my daughter's. Then ours.

Grandfather’s cane clanked against the marble, then the hardwood floor, and it had the same effect as music in horror movies. Sweat broke out on

the back of my neck. Drawers were half open, clothes thrown all over the floor. A single note on the nightstand, the only organized flat surface.

Killing my Da wasn't the worst thing you've done. Neither was killing my mother. Arranging a marriage for ***our*** *daughter was bad. Putting her life in danger was worse. But lying to me sealed the deal.*

It felt like a blow to my stomach. It stole my fucking breath. First, a deathly stillness fell over me, then burning rage turned my blood to fire. Red crept into my vision and every coherent thought left my brain.

I lost it.

I destroyed every single thing in my penthouse. Our bed. The crib. Furniture. Photos. When every single item laid scattered all over the floor, I moved on to the walls.

Hours later I sat on the edge of the windowsill, my elbows on my knees and fury burning in my chest. There was also worry. My woman and daughter were out there alone. Vulnerable.

The door slammed shut somewhere. I didn't look behind me. That scent that came to represent family, baby powder, didn't reach me. I didn't have to look behind me to know it wasn't her. It wasn't my baby.

"Nonno called me," Cassio said with frustration coloring his voice. In my rage, I forgot about my grandfather. "Don't tell me you're renovating." His voice was right behind me.

I didn't respond, staring blankly in front of me. "Where are Margaret and the baby?"

Wordlessly, I handed him the note.

She'd left me.

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Chapter Forty-Four

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LUCA

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Almost Three Years Later

Luciano Vitale's home buzzed with life.

Laughter. Screaming children. It all caused this ache in my chest to grow.

Luciano's daughter, Francesca Aria Vitale, beamed and chattered, grinning and watching her father like he was a God. Fuck if it didn't make me jealous.

I had split my time between New York and Sicily. Albeit, I preferred to stay away from New York. Too many happy faces and families in my friends were a reminder of my own failure.

It was torture. Pain. A gut-wrenching one. But anger and rage started to overtake those other emotions.

There hadn't been a single day that passed since Margaret and our daughter disappeared that I hadn't thought of them. Unlike the first time, she hid better. Taking the passports I had made up for emergencies, she fled the country with our daughter, landed in London and from there, all traces of her ended.

There had been no sign of her or my daughter since. Not even Nico with all his resources could locate them.

Two fucking years. Soon my baby girl would turn three. Another birthday I'd miss.

The constant ache in my chest grew and grew until a permanent darkness resided in my chest. Anger grew by the day.

She took my daughter from me. She fucking left me. She burned all we had to ash without a single backward glance. She should have trusted me to protect her and our daughter. She should have talked to me about it.

You should have trusted her with your secrets and agreements you made too, my mind mocked. Fuck. Off.

Wonderful. Now I was telling myself to fuck off.

"Anything on Guido?" Luciano asked, bouncing his daughter on his knee. Matteo, his son, was right outside the office, being chased by Nico's twin girls. My little nieces. Hannah, one of the twins, was pretty adamant about marrying him. She was probably trying to convince him to do it today.

"No," Cassio answered when it was clear I wasn't going to. "I can't believe that fucker played along with Maeve's body. Helped us clean that fucking scene, and all along he'd been sleeping with her."

Guido, Nonno's cousin, worked with Margaret's mother. The two teamed up and worked against me.

"That's one cold bastard," Luciano muttered. "Your grandfather must have been disappointed that his own family did this."

He had no idea. Nonno had known Guido his whole life. He never thought to look at him when shit started happening. Truthfully, neither did I. Except the suggestion that Margaret gave us on an untraceable device led us directly to him.

Now that asshole was somewhere on this godforsaken planet hiding, like the coward he was.

"I still can't believe Callahan bought that his sister-in-law left without saying goodbye, then landed herself in a fatal car crash," Nico muttered.

He was there that night. He didn't see what happened, but we needed him to hack into all Callahan's surveillance and wipe it clean.

"Maeve never came around," Cassio grumbled. "The only reason she showed up that day was to see her daughter. Apparently she wanted to see with her own eyes that her daughter married the boy who shot her father."

The fucking secret that cost me everything. I should have told her. I was terrified of losing her so I didn't. It turned out I lost her anyhow. Both her and my daughter.

"Are you sure she didn't go back to Sicily?" Luciano asked. "Hiding in plain sight. That's what Grace did," he grumbled, his expression darkened slightly thinking back to those days. Grace left him too. Slightly different circumstances, but he ended up searching for her for three long years.

"Nonno's men searched the whole country," I said darkly. "The entire fucking continent."

“Africa?” Nico asked, then shook his head before I could answer. “Not likely.”

My jaw clenched.

“A newborn would have needed way too many vaccines to go to Africa,” I said. “But now–”

Fuck, it had been almost three years. She could be anywhere.

“How in the fuck did she learn about your deal with Marchetti?” Cassio pondered for the millionth time.

“Her mother had to have told her,” I gritted. If I could kill that bitch, I’d do it all over again. Just sooner. What kind of goddamn mother would be willing to sell out her own daughter and granddaughter to Marchetti?

The mafia soldati called him ‘il diavolo.’ There was a fucking reason for it, because that devil didn’t give second chances.

Matteo busted through the French doors, the twins at his heels. “Daddy, Arianna said she’ll keep me hostage so Hannah can marry me.”

Everyone shared an amused look. I had no amusement left in me. Only bitterness. Only anger that tasted like acid, even after all these years.

“Get over here,” Hannah squealed. “You haven’t said ‘I do’ and I need my diamond.”

Nico muttered something under his breath about being too old for this shit, then grabbed his drink and downed it in one go. Cassio grumbled that we were raising scary women.

“Maybe he’s just too scared to marry you,” Arianna pondered. “Mommy said that not all boys will be able to handle us.”

Jesus Christ. What was Bianca teaching these girls?

“Your mother was right about that,” Cassio said, shaking his head.

Luciano just grinned. “Buddy, we're gonna have to put these women in line. You’re too good looking to settle so young.”

Bianca and Grace sauntered in behind the children, smug grins on their faces.

“They can always force Matteo to marry him,” Bianca mused. “After all, isn’t that the on-going theme with y’all?”

Nico’s lips pulled into a half-smile. “But Cara Mia, look how good it worked out for us.”

My sister shook her head, but her expression softened as she sat on her husband’s lap. “It did but you could have wooed me and got down on one

knee.” She blew out a wistful breath. “That would have been super romantic. Wouldn’t it, girls?”

Hannah and Arianna’s faces lit up. “Oh, yeah!” They both exclaimed at the same moment and their eyes turned to Matteo. “We’ll make Matteo get down on his knees.”

The clear terror on Matteo’s face said it all. He wasn’t up for it. He bolted before anyone registered what was happening, leaving us all in the dust. My nieces were clearly unhappy about that and unwilling to let him have his space.

“Your girls are savages,” Luciano muttered.

Grace chuckled, taking her own spot on his lap. “And your son keeps taunting them, playing hard to get.”

Fuck, if this scene didn’t make me jealous. Everybody had their own family, gushing over their children while my own fucking disappeared on me.

“Luca was the only one who actually wooed his lady into marrying him,” Bianca said, her expression softening as she flicked me a glance.

Except that didn’t make me feel any better. Unlike my friends, I’d done something worse. I used our child as a bargaining chip. Granted, it was to save her life but it didn’t make it any better.

“Well, he had to do something for Margaret to disappear,” Áine said, glaring at me as she strutted through with Nonno on her arm.

Nonno shook his head. “We miscalculated, that’s all. But we’ll get Margaret and Penelope back.”

I got to my feet, finished with this conversation.

My grandfather was right on one account.

I’d bring them back.

If I had to burn down the world, drain the oceans, or move the planets in this solar system, I’d bring them back and then I’d never let go.

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Chapter Forty-Five

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LUCA

The metallic smell filled Nonno's dungeon.

The floor was sticky under my combat boots. I had tortured Guido's brother for a week straight now. Family was sacred in our world. Yet right now as my clothes soaked with blood and his cries filled the air, I didn't give a fuck.

The only family that mattered to me were my wife and daughter.

It had been two years, seven months, three weeks, and five days since I had last seen them. I missed two birthdays. Two Halloweens. Two Christmases. Soon, it'd be three and then who knew… four, five, six, all of them.

My heart pounded as I beat him. My ears buzzed. And I relished in his screams more than was normal. The rage that filled me grew with each day without my wife.

She left me. She took my daughter. She left me.

Two men lay crumbled on the stone floor at my feet. Nonno sat in his chair by the door. He insisted on being here. Poor guy. He thought he'd get peace after I married. The only thing he got was war.

War with his family. Discontent with Marchetti.

At least it wasn't war. I'd kept him at bay about my daughter. I played the game of words. For two years, he'd nagged me about seeing my daughter. For two years, I'd assured him the arranged marriage would proceed as planned, when both of our children are adults and my daughter turned twenty-one.

We were a step away from war with Marchetti. I knew that both Nonno and I would sleep better when Guido was dead.

He was the fucker who stole our shipments. He was the man who got in bed, literally, with Maeve and slipped the news on the arranged marriage. It turned out that he was counting on succeeding Nonno.

He never counted on Margaret and me.

My wife, who left me without a second thought. If only she'd trusted me.

You should have trusted her too, a little voice whispered, but I ignored it.

Fuck that voice. Fuck everything. Right now, I'd find Guido and kill the motherfucker. For betraying Nonno. For betraying me. For costing me my family.

We captured Guido's brother in Rome on his way to Marchetti. He was so fucking close, it made my heart pound with adrenaline. Or maybe it was just this personal beating I was dishing.

I smiled cruelly down at my cousin. I scoffed at the name in my head.

"I want to know where is your fratello?" I repeated. "I can do this for months. I'll bring a doctor to heal you enough, only to continue again. Days, weeks, months of agony."

He jerked against his bindings. "Will you let me live?"

The terror in his eyes told me he knew he wouldn't get out of this alive. But I guess hope was hard to extinguish. Fuck, I knew it myself. Every fucking day, I woke up hoping today was the day I'd find my daughter and wife.

I held his gaze, but I didn't answer. A bead of sweat rolled down his temple. I didn't pity him. I felt nothing, but I often wondered if I'd eventually find myself on the receiving end of torture. Maybe soon. Once Marchetti found out I had no way of fulfilling my agreement. Once he found out it was I and my bastard father who cost his brother his life.

"Last time. Where is your brother?"

When he didn't answer, I started to peel his skin.

It took him another twenty minutes to reveal the location of his brother.

His reward was a bullet between his eyes.

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Chapter Forty-Six

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MARGARET

Gentle waves crashed onto the pebbled beach in a rhythmic soothing sound. The scent of local flora fragranced the air. The voices of tourists speaking different tongues traveled on the breeze.

We had hidden in the little town on this island for two years. After I'd stolen the passport, a hundred grand in cash, and took the clothes and necessities, we'd been on the move. Once I landed in London, I ditched the passports, bought a car on the black market along with a fake ID for Penelope and me, then drove.

For the first three months, we were constantly on the move.

I had learned to live with a lot less. It helped that I breastfed so the main expenditure was diapers and food for me. It wasn't until we settled in Croatia that I finally found a job. A guide to English speaking tourists during spring, summer, and early fall.

Our new home, the island of Silba, was a car free island unlike any I had ever seen or experienced. The first few months we were here, it was hard to get used to not hearing the hum of an engine. Now, after two years hiding in paradise, I couldn't fathom living in a metropolitan city ever again.

I rocked back and forth sitting on the porch with Penelope sound asleep in my arms. It had been a busy day at the beach, and she had barely stayed awake during dinner. Stretching my back and careful not to wake my baby up, I soaked in the view of the Adriatic sea that spread for miles and miles in front of me.

It took my breath away every single time.

Life was finally good. It took some time. There were still days when loneliness tugged at my heart, but my baby was safe. That was all that mattered. We had our routine and my little job. I hadn’t socialized with the locals. The language barrier was huge, but a bigger setback was worry if we would be found. I didn’t want anyone else in trouble on our account.

A few locals walked by in front of our little wall that separated our house from the path that circled the beach. They got used to us here and recognized us. Although I usually kept to myself.

They waved with a smile on their faces, and I did the same. It was the extent of my adult interaction. That and my trips to the grocery store. They probably thought me weird, but I just didn’t want anyone to get caught up in anything in case Marchetti found us.

Or Luca.

A sharp pain sliced through my heart. As it did every time I thought of him. This baby and I were a means to an end for him. He put our daughter in danger. That was one thing I could never forgive.

Tilting my face up to the sky darkening by the second, my thoughts traveled across the ocean to the man who stole my heart. He cheated and connived, got me pregnant, then swept in as if he was my savior.

I fell in love with a villain. A persistent villain.

Yet, I couldn’t find the strength to hate him. He loved our daughter. I knew he did. I saw it during those first few months of her life.

Yet, this life without him, while content, wasn’t a happy one.

The fragmented memory of the night of my father’s murder returned. I recalled every single moment until the moment I passed out next to my father’s body. I remembered why Da didn’t shoot first. He saw a boy with a gun.

I recalled that day much clearer now, and I let the memory drift to the forefront of my mind.

“What the–" I could still see him hold his gun as he stretched out his arm. But he wasn’t shooting. My eyes darted and I saw him. A scared little boy with a grown-up weapon.

My heart ached. From fear for my da, and from seeing that gut-wrenching fear on the boy’s face.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

My father’s body tumbled down the stairs and screams tore from my lips. Thud. Thud. Thud. It went on and on, Father's big, strong body rolled

down the steps forever when in fact it had to be just a few seconds.

He landed on his back, two bullets in his chest and one in his throat.

I stared frozen at the bloodstain blossoming on Da's chest. Blood quickly pooled around him like a red sea.

He gasped, his eyes on me. Horror. Terror. Fear. I watched my Da's strong body struggle to move, when steps echoed against the marble floor. Thud. Thud. Thud.

Every sound dulled under the buzzing in my ears.

"R-run," he gurgled. He fought to live. Struggled to lift himself up, but his body was too weak. Then his frame fell back and I watched the life fade from his eyes.

My blood roared. Liquid dripped down my fingers and my eyes lowered to find that I dug my nails into my palms so hard I was bleeding.

A pair of black boots kicked at my father's dead corpse.

"Good riddance," the old man sneered.

It was then that I finally awoke from my stupor. I shifted around to run but it was too late. A hand wrapped around my neck.

"Where are you running to, little girl?" he purred, lifting me up into the air. My fingers clawed at his wrist. I gasped for air as he carried me, my feet dangling off the ground. My father's body was right underneath me. I wanted to hug him. I wanted to save him. But he was gone.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

A cold blade pressed against my throat.

I kicked and clawed. It was then I caught a glimpse of my mother. Her face was smeared with blood, tears, and makeup. She was in a nightgown. It was the middle of the day. Why was she in a nightgown?

"Mamma," I choked out, every syllable hurting my throat. She didn't move.

But the little boy did. He went after the man. Why was he helping me? He shot my father and now he wanted to help me. Why?

The silver flashed through the air.

My vision dimmed. My consciousness slipped. A loud roar broke through the haze in my brain. A painful roar. It wasn't mine.

My body fell to the cold marble, my skull hitting the stone and blackness pulled me under.

Benito didn't kill me because a twelve-year-old boy came behind him and stabbed his father in the back. Luca was the reason I survived that day.

He saved that little five-year-old girl so many years ago, but he destroyed the woman I had become. Not because he killed my da, but because he lied to me and kept it from me.

Irony at its best.

In the grand scheme of things, I couldn't even blame him for my father's murder. He was just a boy, being used by a cruel parent. But I couldn't move past him using our daughter to pay for his sins. That I couldn't forgive.

My body, on the other hand, was an entirely different problem. It refused to heed the warning. It hummed thinking about my husband. It craved his hands on me. The pleasure he always delivered.

Penelope shifted in my arms, and I firmly pushed my husband out of my mind. If only it was as easy to push him out of my heart.

My lips curved into a small smile seeing my daughter's face. It was so tranquil. She giggled in her sleep and my heart fluttered with warmth. She had happy dreams. She was a happy baby. She might have looked like me, but she had his smile.

Despite what Luca had done, I made sure she remembered her Pàpa. There was a framed photo sitting on the nightstand beside her bed, watching over her. She'd kiss it every night and every morning.

She knew who her daddy was. Just not *what* he was.

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Chapter Forty-Seven

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LUCA

It took me three days to locate Guido.

Three days of no sleep.

The Tyrrhenian Sea stretched for miles around me, its crystal blue water attracting tourists and locals alike. Its beauty fell flat for me. I could be standing in paradise, and it would be lost on me. Nothing mattered. Nothing moved me any longer.

I was dressed in all black once more. Black hid blood the best. And today, there would be blood. Guido's blood.

I stood by the sliding door of my office on the yacht that was anchored off the coast of Salerno. My fingers itched to start fighting. It was all I had come to live for. Hunting the men who cost me my happy life. I was robbed of my second chance.

A red mist blurred my vision.

It was always the same when I thought of my daughter and wife. The swift anger choked my throat. It suffocated. It tore at the seams of my sanity. I was falling apart.

I knew it. Nonno knew it. Cassio fucking knew it.

Please. God, please bring them back to me. I'm no good without them.

I couldn't remember the last time I prayed. Ever since she left me, I prayed. Yet all my prayers continued to remain unanswered.

Cassio, Luciano, and Sasha, the latest fucker of our group to fall for a woman, crowded into my office. Fuck, I hated to see them all. It was a constant reminder of what I had and then lost.

It would eventually break me. I knew it would.

“Are you alright?” Cassio eyed me suspiciously.

“I’m fine.”

My voice was cold. I had gotten good at hiding it all. Excellent even. I straightened my sleeves.

“You look like shit,” Sasha grumbled. “When was the last time you slept?”

I didn’t answer. The last night I slept well was the night before my wife left me. Since then, it was only barely enough to get by.

“By my calculation, it’s been three days,” Cassio answered for me, ignoring my murderous glare.

“Man, you can’t do that,” Luciano said, shaking his head. “You can’t be sharp with lack of sleep. When Grace disappeared for those three years, I had to at least shove sleeping pills in my system and get some rest.”

“Are we going to reminisce or are we going to get to work?” I hissed annoyed. I didn’t care for anyone’s advice. It wouldn’t bring my wife back.

“We just have to find her, Luca,” Cassio reasoned. “For Christ’s sake, Luciano put a gun to his wife’s head and she forgave him. Eventually.”

“Thanks for that, fucker,” Luciano grumbled.

“We have confirmation?” I demanded to know, ignoring their blabbing.

“Yes.” The Sicilians and other members of Cosa Nostra from nearby territories were coming. Guido built himself a new criminal organization. Apparently, he was out to get the DiMauro mafia under his new rule too. It was the only reason I’d pulled in extra forces. Otherwise, I’d prefer to work alone.

“The only variable is whether Marchetti is backing up Guido,” Cassio reasoned. “If he is, all the help we are getting will turn on us, and we’ll have more enemies to fight getting out of this country.”

“And they say Italy is a romantic country,” Sasha grumbled, rolling his eyes.

MARCHETTI WASN’T BACKING GUIDO. We tore through the bastard’s defenses effortlessly. It was almost too easy. The moment we captured him, all the members of Cosa Nostra disbursed fast. Too fast.

It seemed odd, but I didn’t dwell on it too much. I was eager to get to work on this fucking family member.

Sasha and Luciano were leaning against the stone of Guido’s dungeon. Ironic that he’d die in his own dungeon. It was poetry really.

“Thank fuck,” Sasha grunted. “This fucker just wouldn’t shut the fuck up.”

Luciano grinned. “He thought he had enough to bribe us.”

That alone showed how stupid and inadequate Guido was. He was Nonno’s youngest cousin, but it seemed the dumbest too. If he’d done his research, he’d know that Luciano had more money than he’d spend in ten lifetimes. And that was if he lived like a king.

“Shame he was only a few billion short,” Sasha snickered.

Guido sat in the middle of the cell, strapped to a chair. He held a resemblance to Nonno. He was family. Until he no longer was. Family didn’t stab you in the back.

“Marchetti won’t let you get away with this,” he hissed.

He was Marchetti’s age, but not nearly as rich nor charismatic. It was probably the reason he had gotten so greedy and so conniving. He was lacking so he resorted to betraying his family to prove himself.

A cruel and cold smile twisted my lips. “I don’t see him here.”

He sneered. “He rules the organization. You just run a fraction of it.”

“But my fraction makes Marchetti more money than all the other organizations in Italy. He’d be hard pressed to lose it for someone like you.”

Grinning like the devil, I pulled over a chair and sat facing him. I wouldn’t let him get the best of me. I’d make him suffer, for a very long time. The only thing I wanted to hear from his mouth were his screams.

“How is your wife?” he taunted. “I bet Marchetti won’t be happy to hear your daughter is lost to you. How will you fulfill the agreement if you don’t have a daughter?”

My control snapped. I lunged, my fist connecting with his face. Once. Twice. The chair rocked from the force of the impact and fell back.

I lifted him, then continued pounding on him. Blood quickly stained his face, his split open lips causing blood to coat his chin. But I took pleasure in making him suffer, pouring all my rage on his face. For costing me *them*. The two most important humans of my life.

A hand came to rest on my shoulder. It was my brother’s. I never even heard him enter the cell.

It was only then that it registered. My heavy breathing. The buzzing in my ears. Red marring my vision. Guido's face was swollen beyond recognition. His skull smashed flat against the stone cell floor.

He was dead. Brutalized. Unrecognizable.

"Now isn't this a sight?" A voice penetrated the fog in my skull. A familiar voice. Then it registered.

Marchetti. The Padrino.

Fuck, this was not a good time for a visit.

An army of Marchetti's men crowded into the room, leaving space for Capo Dei capi. Two of Marchetti's men, his consigliere and his enforcer, stood beside him with their guns pointed at us. Dante Leone and Giovanni Agosti.

"It's been too long, Luca DiMauro," he drawled.

His eyes flickered to the unmoving body at my feet and he barely raised a brow.

Sasha and Luciano were at my side, Cassio already playing the diplomat.

"Marchetti, we didn't expect you," my brother greeted him.

"Why not? You are in my territory."

God, if I could get away with beating in his skull, I'd be happy to do it. Looking at him was a reminder of my fuckery,

"You've been busy, DiMauro." It was the only thing that kept me going. "Too busy to come and visit me with your wife and daughter."

My knuckles burned and our gazes locked. He knew exactly what was going on all along.

He knew I didn't have them.

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Chapter Forty-Eight

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MARGARET

The beach was beautiful, the water crystal blue and inviting. It was Penelope's most favorite time, splashing in the water and building forts. The breeze swept through, the distant laugh traveling our way.

Penelope and I sat on the towel, both of us in matching bathing suits.

"I so pretty," she babbled. Her long, curly hair, dark as night, bounced with her every movement. She watched me with eyes as blue as the sea next to us, sparkling happily as she watched the world. She was a happy and very social kid, despite our reclusive life.

I couldn't help a proud smile. "You are very pretty," I agreed. "The most beautiful princess in the world."

Her eyes traveled over the empty beach. There were a few locals scattered around, taking advantage of the warm September sun.

"No friends." She folded her hands over her chest, slightly disappointed.

"I'll be your friend," I told her. "Most kids went back to school. It's just you and me, princess. What do you say? Want to build a castle?"

She nodded her head eagerly and I dug out sunscreen from my bag, then applied it to her skin. She giggled as I tickled her while rubbing it into her skin. Then she did the same to my back. Although by the time she was done, I had more sunscreen than skin on me.

Then ignoring the world and all the problems, we focused on building a fairytale castle. We worked hard on it as the sound of the waves washed into the shoreline with a soft, soothing rhythm. The only thing that interrupted it were the seagulls, and even they sang to the tune of the sea.

Sun warmed our skin. The scent of salt filled our lungs. Contentment warmed our hearts.

Two short blasts interrupted our focus. Both of us lifted our heads to find a yacht passing a little fishing boat on their right. My brows furrowed. It was unusual to see such a big boat close to the shoreline.

Placing my hand over my eyes to use it as a makeshift visor, I watched the gigantic 30-meter yacht slowly drift over the water, a lone figure on the top deck. It was a split deck and by the looks of it, topped with all the amenities.

Awareness rolled down my back. The man watched us through binoculars, but he was too far to distinguish his features. But it was unmistakable; he was watching us.

The breeze swept through, foreboding and fear riding on it.

The feeling grew by the second, anguish filling my heart. My eyes darted to the name of the boat. *Vendetta.*

I didn't need Google translate to understand what it meant. Vengeance.

"It's a coincidence," I rasped under my breath, while my heart drummed so hard, I was certain it cracked my ribs. "Nothing else. Just a stupid coincidence. It's a common name for a boat, and Italy is just across the sea."

"Mamma." Penelope's voice pulled my attention back to our task at hand. She watched me with furrowed brows.

"Let's keep building," I said with a forced smile. And all the while, dread pooled in the pit of my stomach.

A dark shadow came over our work of art. Both my daughter and I lifted our faces and my heart came to standstill.

"Nonno!" I shot to my feet, my heartbeat resuming in a wild drumming. My eyes flickered to two men behind him, guards I hadn't recognized. "What are you doing here?"

He seemed tired, although healthy. He wore a wide-brimmed hat and an old-time suit with suspenders. He looked the same, yet paler than I remembered it. More sickly. His eyes were hidden behind aviator glasses so it was hard for me to read his expression.

I wanted to hug him, tell him how much I missed him. Apologize. I didn't know. Instead, I remained still, waiting.

"I expected more enthusiasm." He smiled.

So did I, I wanted to answer, but I remained quiet. My pulse fluttered as I waited for him to say anything else. To be angry. To hate me. Anything. Instead, he remained quiet, watching me behind those glasses that hid him from me.

"Did you come on that Italian mega yacht?" I questioned instead.

He removed his glasses and our eyes met.

"I did, bella." My heart ached at hearing the word my husband always used on me. "Luca is in trouble, and you're the only one who can save his life."

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Chapter Forty-Nine

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MARGARET

Luca was being held captive by Marchetti for the past two days.

Not only was he holding Luca hostage, but also Cassio, Luciano, and Sasha. If the Nikolaev brothers learned of this, Nonno feared it would turn into a bloody war. If I refused to cave into Marchetti's demands, it wouldn't end well for anyone. Including my daughter.

Apparently, Marchetti expects me to find where he'd hidden Luca and come to him, along with my daughter.

It was a trap. It had to be. Yet, like a willing lamb to the slaughter I went in search of my husband.

When I asked Nonno how he found me, he said Marchetti knew all along where I was. He hadn't lost me for a single second. It was Marchetti's mega-yacht that brought him to us on the Croatian island. Marchetti hid all traces of me and Penelope while he kept an eye on us, waiting for the opportune moment to strike.

Well, he didn't exactly strike. All along, Marchetti was biding his time. Reeling us in until he finally came face to face with Luca. He certainly knew how to play this game.

After Nonno had found me and given me the rundown of what had happened, he had put me in touch with the man who knew where Marchetti took men to torture them. Not even Nonno had that information.

So now, rescuing Cassio, Luciano, Sasha, and most importantly my husband lay on my shoulders. It fucking felt like a trap.

"This is the safe house?" I asked incredulously as I made air quotations around the word *safe house*.

Nonno’s contact nodded. The gray brick building looked like it had withstood World War I and II. And the name! What a freaking name for a torture house. He should really consider changing the name to dungeon chambers.

“Are you going to be okay?” he asked. I had only just met him but he seemed worried about my plan.

“Yes, my brothers will help me,” I told him, while fear crushed my windpipe. At least I knew I was in over my head and called my brothers who dropped it all to come to the rescue.

“Good.”

I flicked him a final look. They called him the Bitter Prince. The illegitimate son of the Italian Don. If you asked me, he was the better son. He was more sane than his brother who was in line to inherit their family’s business.

Bitter Prince would help us and the DiMauro family would help him when the time was right.

God, he was beautiful. I could see why women fell all over themselves for him. Six feet five of muscle clad in dark jeans and a white button-down shirt that was in contrast to his skin. Those high cheekbones. Thick, brown hair. Eyes as dark as night.

He didn’t look Italian, but he had as much Italian blood as my daughter. His look was a combination of his father’s Italian descent and his mother's Asian heritage. His exotic physical appearance came from his mother's side. Some didn't think he had enough Italian in him to make him worthy while others thought that his physical appearance was a disadvantage, the idiots, but I disagreed. The man was gorgeous and his charisma was off the charts. He'd be a much better heir to his father's mafia than anyone else, in my opinion.

He gave me a side-ways glance, sending my eyes to his. “Make sure you keep your word.”

I nodded.

“If we get out of this alive, all the west coast shipments of my husband’s will be routed through your ports,” I told him. I hoped it helped him get what he wanted. “Also, Nonno wanted me to relay a message.” He waited for me to continue. “When you’re ready to take over and you need help, the DiMauro family will be behind you.”

A terse nod, then his gaze flicked to the car window where Penelope slept in her car seat, oblivious to what was about to happen. I trusted Nonno, but I couldn’t bear to leave her with him. Besides, Marchetti indicated he wanted to see me and Penelope. If my rescue mission went awry, I needed her close by.

“Good luck, Margaret DiMauro.”

He disappeared into the night without a backwards glance.

The hum of the car engine soothed my nerves. I dug out my phone and shot the address to Aiden. I’d need my brother’s help to survive this.

“Just hang in there, Luca,” I murmured. “For your daughter.”

Because I knew he wouldn’t hang on for me.

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Chapter Fifty

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LUCA

Marchetti was holding back his punches.

Not that it fucking matter. I'd be dead at the end of it all anyway.

Sasha's Russian curses alongside Cassio and Luciano's Italian ones echoed through the dark basement. We've been here two… no, three days now. I was surprised the Nikolaev brothers hadn't attacked and bombed this entire country to pieces. Grace and her husband's friends nor Cassio's associates wouldn't be far behind.

Since nothing had happened, except Marchetti playing mind games with me, it probably meant they still didn't know Sasha was captured.

"You really thought it was wise to lie to me?" Marchetti asked in a cold voice. "First about the set up and then fooling me into thinking there'd finally be a joining of the DiMauro and Marchetti line."

I shrugged. "Honestly, you focus on the wrong things." When he cocked his eyebrow, I continued, "You need to worry about your hospitality." The fucker wore white clothes for this beat down. "And your pretty outfit is ruined. Washing out blood is a bitch."

"Maybe I want your friends in the cell next door to see the damage I've done as I pass them."

"Awww, aren't we a bit too old to show off?"

He refused to be baited. Of course, why in the hell would he care? He had nothing to prove. My eyes flickered behind him to his men. Dante Leone and Giovanni Agosti, his two constants.

Marchetti, Leone, Agosti, Romero, and DiMauro - the five biggest family names of the underworld, of the fallen empire. The heads of those families were known as kings.

“Are you going to give them a turn?” I said, gesturing behind him to where the two men were leaning against the wall. “You know, for variety's sake.”

Marchetti chuckled. “You always were a stubborn motherfucker.”

“Thanks. I’ll take that as a compliment.”

Blood trickled down my eyebrow and clouded my vision. Jesus, the guy barely started working on me. I couldn’t pass out. Not yet. I should have slept more before we went after Guido. Instead, I insisted on remaining awake for days.

Fuck! Hindsight was a bitch.

I should have planned this better. Or at least have taken a nap.

“You know, Marchetti. I’m not boastful, but I’d have to say my dungeons are so much better. Darker and scarier. More medieval. This one is just okay.”

I could hear Sasha’s Russian cursing from the cell next door. “Luca, shut-the-fuck-up.”

I snickered. “That coming from a guy that taunted his brother-in-law in church while kidnapping the bride.”

“Marchetti, why don’t you start on us?” Luciano attempted to pull his attention to himself. “I’m feeling unloved.”

“My grievances are not with you,” Marchetti said, not biting. “This is between Luca and me.”

“And if you kill him, this will be between me, all my friends, and you,” Cassio, always the protective big brother, hissed.

My captors ignored him. They had the upper hand and they knew it.

“It’s unfortunate you didn’t discuss with your wife the future of our children,” Marchetti said as if there weren’t annoyed growls coming from the cell next door. “However, you can be certain that the marriage will happen before my dying breath. With little Penelope’s parents alive or dead.”

I jerked against the restraints, fury slowly pumping through my veins and burning through every cell of my body. “If you touch Margaret–”

The unfinished sentence and threat hung in the air as his fist connected with my jaw. Stars swam in my vision and fireworks exploded behind my

eyelids.

“If I wanted to hurt them, they’d be dead,” Marchetti warned. “I’ve known where they were all along, Luca DiMauro. Why do you think you and your friends couldn’t find them?”

I roared, letting out all the months and years of anger, frustration, bitterness and fear swallow me. Almost three year of torture. Almost three years of anger, being replaced by fear that maybe, just maybe, my wife and daughter had been killed. Nobody disappeared so efficiently, least of all a woman who had no successful experience with disappearing.

“I’m going to end you,” I rasped. “If it’s the last thing I do, I’m going to shred you to pieces. My daughter will never marry your son.”

His gun to the back of my head pulled me into blackness.

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Chapter Fifty-One

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MARGARET

I had packed up a bag and a few things that Penelope always loved having with her. I also had a weapon on me and a few other necessities in case things went awry.

They are bound to go wrong, my reason whispered.

But I knew my options were limited. In fact, nonexistent. Marchetti knew where I was, whether I did nothing or chose to save my husband. So saving my husband was definitely on my agenda.

He saved me. Now, I'd save him.

A holstered gun was strapped to my chest, under my raincoat. It would seem that sometime over the last three years my aversion to knives was cured. All I had to do was face my memories and what happened that day my father died. The rest was history.

A knife in the back of my pants and one in the holster wrapped around my calf, tucked inside my boots. I wore jeans and it hid my weapons well. I also had two syringes - one with adrenaline and one with a sedative - in my pockets. I really hoped I wouldn't have to use it.

It has been almost three years since I'd seen Luca. Almost Three years since he'd seen his daughter.

Guilt sliced through me, but I shoved it back.

I had imagined a million scenarios of my reunion with my husband. This was never one of them. Rescuing him from Marchetti. The man who he promised our daughter to.

I got back into the SUV I rented to ensure I had enough space for everyone, and drove around the block. In Rome, that took longer than

normal. Fifteen minutes later I finally pulled up in front of the safe house. Correction, torture house. There was nothing safe about that place.

I set the heat up to ensure the car was warm for my baby before I exited. Aiden waited for me in the shadows. The moment our eyes connected, emotions slammed into me.

“Brother,” I choked out, barely able to get the words out.

He pulled me into a hug and that familiar cologne overwhelmed all my senses.

“My baby sister.” His voice held a note of rasp, desperation evident in it. “Almost three years. I have worried about you every single day, Sis.”

“I know,” I rasped. And it was all for naught because the only ones I was hiding from were my family. “Thank you for helping me.”

“Always,” he rasped. “We’ll always be here for you.”

I squeezed him hard, my face in his chest, unable to find words. My throat squeezed hard. Three years of loneliness caught up. I had my baby with me, but my brothers were family too.

“We feel slighted,” a familiar voice came from behind me and I pulled away. “Hello, baby sister.”

I found Tyran and Kyran watching me with identical frowns and worry.

I sighed. “Almost three years and no kisses?”

Tyran wrapped an arm around my shoulders, and Kyran did the same, both sandwiching me between their big bodies. I groaned softly.

“You’re smothering me,” I complained.

“We can’t help it. You’re our baby sister.”

Thick emotions swallowed me, making it harder to breathe and to think. But I needed a clear head right now. Nonno warned me that Marchetti might need confirmation from me on the arrangement Luca had made with him to save my life when I so cluelessly wandered into the country that had it out for the Callahans.

Hindsight.

The look Nonno gave me when I left him felt like a knife piercing through my heart. He didn’t ask me what I’d do. He didn’t ask whether I’d reinforce the agreement of my daughter’s marriage to Marchetti’s son.

I think he feared the answer.

We didn’t have time for the past, nor pondering on what ifs. I’d save Luca, then figure out where to go from there.

“So who’s staying and watching over your favorite niece?” I asked, glancing back at my daughter who still slept soundly with a small smile on her lips. Her dark curls cascaded down her face, hindering one side.

My brothers followed my gaze and instantly their expressions softened.

“Ugh, fight Italians or watch our niece. That’s a tough call,” Kyran declared, smiling. It didn’t take a genius to figure out what he would choose.

Tyran punched him in the shoulder. “It’s a fucking no brainer.” The twins shared a look and grinned. “We’ll take niece duty.” Then as if he couldn’t resist, he flicked a gaze at Aiden. “Our big brother is scared of diapers.”

Aiden narrowed his eyes on him. “She’s out of diapers, you–”

He couldn’t come up with the adequate word for Tyran so he just groaned and shook his head as if he attempted to convince himself the two of them were not worth him getting riled up.

So Aiden switched into leader mode instead.

“Okay, you two keep our niece safe. At all costs.” He turned to me. “You and I will get your husband out.” I nodded. His eyes narrowed on me. “And then, we’re going home. No more hiding, Sister.”

I nodded.

Tyran slid into the back seat, sitting next to little Penelope while Kyran sat behind the wheel, ready to get us out of here. I didn’t worry about my daughter waking up to their faces. I’d shared their pictures with her. She knew them by heart.

Although the real thing was quite different from pictures. I couldn’t take her with me so this was the next best thing.

Aiden led me inside, but before we entered, I tugged his sleeve. “Won’t we be attacked the moment we enter?”

He shrugged nonchalantly. “I cleared out the entire first and second floor.”

“How did you get access to it?” I whispered.

He grinned. “I’m good with the ladies,” he answered, which of course was no answer at all.

“I don’t want to know,” I muttered. “I swear, Aiden, some things never change.”

He let out a soft chuckle.

“It’s good to have you back, Sis.”

“You too.” My eyes searched the main area. “Now, let’s get my husband back.”

We slowly and cautiously moved through the first floor. The dark oak floor creaked with each step, causing my heart to thunder wildly in my chest. Getting caught wasn’t an option. We passed a sitting area with lime green carpet and ugly chairs. Bodies piled up in the corner and I shook my head.

“Your doing?” I whispered.

Aiden looked unapologetic. Not that I thought he was in the wrong, but at least I tried to keep my murder count in the low digits.

I shook my head. We passed a security room next. Empty, one guard slumped over with a bullet in his temple. My eyes were drawn to the screen. It showed Luca. Tied to the chair, his head hanging low. Blood pooled around him on the ground. He didn’t look good.

“Is he still alive?” I rasped, my heart twisting in my chest. There were three men in there, probably men who worked for Marchetti. Of course, none of them were him. I never thought Marchetti did his own torturing but something was telling me he certainly had a stomach for it. I’d stake my life on it.

Aiden followed my gaze. “Yes. He’s a tough fucker.”

I raised my eyes to meet my brother’s gaze. It was only now that I saw dark shadows spread under his eyes. I knew my brother well. Once I reached out, he probably scouted the entire city and got Marchetti’s schedule down to the second.

“Aiden,” I started, keeping my voice low.

“Huh?”

“Thank you,” I whispered. “To all three of you.”

Aiden’s lips curled and his expression softened. “You’re family. You’ll always be family, Sis. Both you and my niece. Regardless of the last name you carry.”

I swallowed, thankful for my brothers. I was luckier than a lot of other girls in our world. Most men in the underworld saw girls as a means to use them for alliances or distraction. My brothers had always protected me and taken care of me.

We made our way into the basement. The scent of blood and mold lingered in the air. The dim lights barely lit the way, but then most people that roamed this place probably knew their way around blindfolded.

I peeked through one door and a small gasp left me. Cassio, Luciano, and Sasha each laid on a small, metal bed fully clothed, their feet crossed and their arms behind their heads.

“Psst.” The soft sound was barely a whisper.

The three sets of eyes instantly landed on the door. Relief washed over Cassio’s expression. Exasperation on Sasha’s. And exhaustion on Luciano’s.

All three jumped to their feet.

“Fuck, I hoped you wouldn’t show,” Sasha whispered. “Bombing this place with my brothers would be so much fun.”

“Don’t listen to him,” Cassio muttered. “He’s crazy.”

“Woman, just get us out of here,” Luciano grumbled softly. “My wife is probably missing me. I know I’m missing her.”

“You wish your wife was missing you,” Aiden taunted, then kneeled down, his face parallel to the lock. “She’s probably relieved to be a widow.” Luciano growled, but before he could say anything else, Aiden stopped him. “Now everybody shut up so I can focus on picking this ancient lock.”

It took him less than a minute to get it open. The moment the door opened, Cassio pulled me into a hug. “Thank you, Margaret. I know I’m the last person you want to save. We–”

I stopped him. “Save it. None of it matters. Let’s just grab Luca and get the hell out of here.”

He gave me a terse nod. At least our numbers were greater now.

All of us shifted to the last cell in the hallway. We lingered by the last door, grunts and sharp words traveling through the air.

“I go in first,” Aiden whispered faintly. Cassio looked like he wanted to protest but Aiden stopped him, his palm facing him. “You guys were locked up for days. I’m our best bet.”

“You wish,” Sasha grumbled faintly.

“Ignore him,” I croaked. “We need to grab Luca and get the fuck out of here before Marchetti shows up. You guys can do a testosterone competition some other time.”

Aiden handed his spare gun to Cassio, I gave mine to Sasha and then handed my knife to Luciano. “I’m not good with knives,” I murmured.

“You don’t say,” he remarked wryly. “You women go chasing your freedom and come back experts at stealing and killing.”

I gave him a blank look. “He’s talking about someone else,” Cassio whispered. “Now everyone, keep your focus.”

All of us, somewhat armed, shared a glance. With a sharp nod from Aiden his boot flew out and kicked the door open. Efficiently, like they’d practiced this million times, the men moved in sync, killing the guards in the room who were caught unaware. The best I could do was stay behind and let them do their thing. Áine and I were accustomed to fighting together, but with these men, I’d only be in the way.

My eyes landed on Luca, while my brother eliminated Marchetti’s men with a gun, his silencer making it all seem like a mime event. Grunts caused by Luciano stabbing another one, then snapping his neck to keep him silent. One man stumbled onto the floor. The other man fell backwards. The third man kneeled down, his face smashing against the concrete wall. So appropriate that he’d die with his face in Luca’s blood.

Once they were all taken out, I stepped into the room.

My eyes roamed over my husband’s naked body. He only had his black briefs on, his arms and legs tied. Bruises and cuts covered almost every inch of him. My heart clenched at seeing him like that.

There was a table in the far right corner, full of grizzly tools. Some still had blood stains on them. Luca’s eyes peeled open. Those eyes I had dreamt about for the past three years met mine. They stole my breath from my lungs.

I guess some things never change, I thought to myself.

A dark smile twisted Luca’s mouth. An emotion I had never seen in his gaze before twisted my stomach. It was contempt. Disappointment.

“Hello, Wife.” His words came through a rough cough. Luca regarded me quietly as his eyes slid down my body to my hand that still held a gun. “Came to kill me yourself?”

Something about his accusation sliced through my heart. But then what did I expect? I left him. Almost three long years ago.

I sank down to my knees in front of him, kneeling on the sticky floor, my jeans soaking in his blood. His eyes came back to my face, regarding me with that inquisitive way I had come to know from the moment we met. The same curiosity I saw in my daughter’s eyes every single day.

“Where is my daughter?” he asked.

“She’s safe,” I told him.

“You stole her from me.” The accusation in his voice, even in his battered state, was staggering. “You stole my daughter, Margaret. Three fucking years.”

“You fucking sold her,” I accused back, keeping my voice low.

“Three years.” God, the look he gave me just about broke my heart. “Not knowing whether my daughter was alive or dead. Do you know how that feels?”

I leaned over him and started working on the rope. There were no words I could say that would make it better. I was scared for our daughter because of a promise he made to a stranger. It all led us here.

“You two will have to work that out later,” Cassio hissed. “Now is hardly the time.”

“I should have known her brothers knew all along,” Luca accused, glaring at Aiden. My husband must have not been mortally wounded if he still had the energy to throw blame around and glare at my brother.

“We didn’t know where they were,” my brother spat while Luca stiffened. “But I’ll be damned if I’ll waste a single minute bickering about it. They are back. You two work your shit out. If not for you two, then for my niece. If I miss another day of her life, I’m going to kill you both myself.”

My eyes shot to my brother. “Geez, thank you,” I grumbled dryly.

“Marriage, a glorious affair,” Luciano hissed. “I’d like to get back to mine. I’ve been gone for days without my family.”

“Just get me out of this fucking place,” Luca grumbled, ignoring them all. “I want to see my daughter.”

“How badly injured are you?” I murmured, eyeing him as I sliced his ropes. “Can you walk out of here?”

“It’s not too bad.” His voice was hoarse, his hand shaking. My throat tightened and my fingers trembled as I reached into my raincoat pocket. I pulled out the syringe.

“It’s adrenaline,” I told him softly as I pointed it at his thigh. “It will give you a boost until we get to Nonno’s place.”

I ignored Aiden’s eyes, boring into the back of my head. He assumed I’d go back to New York. That wasn’t an option. It would bring war and put a target on everyone around us.

Luca nodded, and when I hesitated, he just rasped, “Do it.”

I injected him with it and instantly he shuddered. When his eyes met mine, his pupils were dilated, the hazel of his eyes almost completely gone.

“Let’s get the fuck out of here,” Sasha urged.

I worked on his bindings at his ankles next with Cassio’s help. He took my knife, wedging the blade under the rope, cutting through it when I heard the creak of the door. I shot to my feet, blocking Luca with my body.

The adrenaline had to be the right call, because he stood up, tall and strong, like a god of vengeance covered in blood. But I knew it was just a perception. He was tired. We needed to get out of here fast.

“Ah, Mrs. DiMauro. Welcome.” Marchetti sauntered into the ghastly room looking like he just stepped off the runway in his expensive suit, his hands tucked in his pockets while two men trailed behind him with guns pointed at us. “I wondered when you’d make your appearance.”

He stopped two feet away from me.

“Get the fuck away from her,” Luca growled at the same time that Aiden cursed in Gaelic, Sasha in Russian and the rest in Italian. It was an international affair.

“Touch my sister, and it’ll be the last thing you ever do, you fucking Italian.”

Lovely, we were already at name calling. Of course, it was a moot point to tell Aiden he just saved Luca who happened to be an Italian too.

All the men attempted to shove me and Luca behind them by forming a wall.

“Stop it, you four,” I snapped. “You can’t fix this for us.”

“Let me just kill him.” Sasha seemed pumped on adrenaline, and he hadn’t even gotten the injection. Maybe he was just pumped up on the Nikolaev psychotic gene. After all, their unhinged ways were world famous.

Marchetti didn’t seem worried, his eyes locked on Luca and me.

My fingers curled around the gun, barely on the trigger.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Marchetti drawled, the hint of his Italian accent my only warning that he wasn’t as calm and unaffected. “I’d hate to tell your daughter I had to kill her parents when she weds my son. Your brothers and her are currently surrounded outside.”

Our eyes locked. I released the safety on the gun. “You can’t have her,” I whispered. “It’s wrong to force our children to marry. Or pay for their

parents' sins. They-" I swallowed a lump in my throat. "They deserve more than that."

Marchetti regarded me curiously. "So you ran off because your husband and I came to an arrangement about our children?"

Before I had a chance to answer, Luca did. "Our marriage issues are none of your concern, Marchetti." Luca spit on the floor, wiping the blood off his mouth with the back of his hand. "By the way, your marriage counseling skills suck."

The corner of Marchetti's lips tipped up. Nice to know we were amusing him.

"Listen, I'm going to take my sister and her husband home," Aiden chimed in, his gun pointed at Marchetti. "This arranged marriage between your children can be discussed for the next twenty years. Penelope is two, for Pete's sake. It wasn't as if she's ready to marry anyone anytime soon."

"Unless these old fuckers prefer to send their kids to church to get married instead of a playground to play," Sasha sneered.

"I wouldn't put it past them," Aiden snarled. "As old and fucked up as this place is."

Marchetti's eyes remained locked on me, not even bothering to acknowledge my brother nor the other men. His eyes remained locked on me. There was something he wanted from me. My gut feeling told me the only way to get out of here was to give it to him. Or I'd cause the death of my husband, his friends, my brother, possibly others, and me

"Last chance, Mrs. DiMauro. Give me the truth on why you vanished, and why did your husband, your family, and your friends pretend you never left?"

Dread filled my lungs. Fear swam through my veins. The future seemed dimmer than ever.

"You want Penelope dead for what Luca's family has done," I rasped. The accusation was unmistakable. "For the set up. You don't give a shit about the wedding arrangement."

Marchetti's face remained an unmoving mask but his eyes flickered with something dark. Something dangerous. And my heart raced so fast, I'd fear an oncoming heart attack if I didn't calm down.

"Elaborate."

One word. One demand. One mistake.

I knew without a doubt that Marchetti didn't know Benito set him up until I had just uttered those words. My gaze slowly shifted to my husband, then to my brother. Aiden was just as confused. Luca wasn't.

My husband staggered to stand in front of me, blocking me from his view. Although it wouldn't be hard to get to me. Still, his attempt at protection moved me. Maybe he still cared.

"Marchetti, your anger is with me," Luca said, his voice hoarse. "Not my wife. Not my daughter."

"Unless you want your wife, brother, friends, and brothers-in-law dead, you will let your wife speak." Marchetti's voice felt like a cold whip. Luca wouldn't stand for it.

"And you will watch what you say," Luca growled. "Nobody threatens my family and friends."

My brother was the one that finally stepped in. "It only took three years for you to call me family," Aiden noted, narrowing his eyes on my husband. "Considering she disappeared for three years, without a word to anyone, I'd like to know what the fuck is going on too."

I gulped, my eyes darting between the men. Suddenly, I was unsure who would kill who. Would it be Marchetti? Would it be my brother? This was not the way it was supposed to go. It was a rescue. Get in and get the hell out.

Marchetti pulled out his own gun and aimed it at my skull. Somehow, I knew this man didn't miss. If he wanted me dead, I'd already be dead. If he wanted my daughter dead, she'd be dead. Oh my God, Tyran and Kyran, Penelope. Maybe they were already hurt, waiting for us.

Steeling my spine, I side-stepped Luca and met Marchetti's dark gaze.

"Aiden, give me your word you won't do anything rash," I said, never wavering from the immediate danger. "Especially towards my husband."

Tense silence followed. This was bad. Suddenly, I knew it'd be bad.

"Aiden," I pleaded.

"I promise."

Inhaling a deep breath, I slowly released it. I didn't want to tell my brother. I didn't want to tear our family apart more than it already was.

"When I was five, my father and I returned home early from an outing," I started, my voice unsteady. "Too early. To find my mother with her–" My voice trailed off and I had to swallow a lump in my throat. "With her lover, Benito King. Da ordered me to go outside, but I stayed." I could feel

Aiden's eyes on me, wondering what my angle was. "Benito had his son as a lookout," I whispered. "A kid with a gun. That kid shot my father, and his father pinned it on your family."

The look of betrayal on Aiden's face splintered me in half. The ghosts and secrets no longer knocked at our door. They were present, filling each corner of this dark and dingy room.

"All this fucking time," Aiden growled, breaking the silence. "You never said a goddamn thing." My brother's hand wrapped around Luca's throat, but my husband refused to go down without a fight. "And you married him."

Forgetting Marchetti's unmoving form, I pushed my body between my brother and my husband. "Stop it, Aiden. Stop it!"

"How could you?" The pain in Aiden's tone felt like knives carving into my chest.

"I remembered Da being shot in staggered pieces when I first met Luca. Initially, I thought it was Benito who shot him," I whispered. "But it wasn't until I heard Mom and Luca in the library that I remembered it all. Ma wanted my daughter dead. She wanted *me* dead."

The shock on Aiden's face was palpable.

Slowly, I returned my attention to Marchetti whose dark eyes remained glued to us. As if he was debating whether to believe me or not.

"I was pissed off Luca made a deal with you and promised you our daughter without talking to me. But it was my mother's words that had me packing my girl up and leaving it all behind. The fear that you'd make Penelope pay with her life for what Luca's father did." Luca's eyes flashed at me. "The way Benito's set up cost your brother his life."

I waited. For what, I was unsure.

Luca pushed me behind him, shielding me with his battered body.

"We're leaving, Enrico." It was the first time I heard Luca call him by his first name rather than the last name. "No one has to get hurt. If you want to end me, then end me. But they have nothing to do with it."

"Funny, because from where I stand, they have everything to do with it."

Marchetti's gaze moved from Luca to me, then back to him. Then to my brother. Strangely enough, it was my brother's face who reflected more rage than Marchetti's. I feared even if we got out of this, I had lost my brother.

I swallowed the rising emotion.

“Please let us leave,” I addressed Enrico. I’d deal with Aiden’s wrath separately.

“You think after news like that, you get to leave, huh?” he drawled. “Just like that.”

“Yes, just like that.” I let out a shuddering breath. “For our children’s future.”

Marchetti’s smile didn’t reach his eyes. “But you told me mere minutes ago that you don’t want your daughter to marry my son.”

Luca’s body slumped barely an inch, but I noticed it. That adrenaline shot wouldn’t last long. God, this wasn’t going very well at all. I closed my eyes, then slowly opened them.

“Do you even want your son married to our daughter? Either way you put it, our families were responsible for your brother’s death.”

“Make it your peace offering.” Enrico’s cold eyes met mine. “The way to bring peace to five families.”

A battle raged inside me. If I agreed, we might have a chance to get out of here. If I didn’t, we probably wouldn’t. Except, I couldn’t just agree to give my daughter away. What if his son was some cruel, deranged boy? Should I demand his next son? How could I ever possibly agree to let my daughter marry someone like that?

“I want my daughter to marry for love,” I rasped, my voice wavering with emotions. “When does all this end if we don’t let our children be happy?” I asked quietly.

Marchetti looked at Luca, then my brother and back to me.

“Please don’t make me give you that promise,” I begged.

Enrico inclined his head. “This marriage arrangement stands. If our children decide they don’t love or like each other, we’ll reevaluate.” Relief slammed into me hearing those words. It was a possible way out. “But I want your word, Margaret DiMauro. I want your commitment.”

Our children wouldn’t marry for another eighteen years at least. I’d have years to ensure Marchetti’s son and our daughter do not cross paths.

“You have my word,” I uttered. “But there will be no visits by your family. There is no point in pretending we’re friends.”

Enrico shook his head. “You’re right. It’s probably for the best.” I hid my relief. “But I’ll consider my brother’s death a debt repaid once our families are joined.”

“Well, we can’t marry the children now,” Cassio chimed in.

“We’re getting the fuck out of here,” Sasha said, shifting his gun between Marchetti, Leone, and Agosti.

Luca nudged me lightly, and we walked towards the door, circled by Aiden, Cassio, and our friends, keeping our eyes and guns trained on Enrico and his men. They returned the favor. We walked backward to keep an eye on them.

Once we were outside, we saw that Enrico’s men had the car surrounded while my brothers stood in front of the windows with their guns trained on them, blocking their view of Penelope. My heart froze. Our steps halted. Did Marchetti just pull one over on us? Did we walk out of this house of torture and into another trap?

One of them had a hand pressed on his earpiece.

“Boss says they’re free to go.”

I led Luca to the parked car. He sank down in the passenger seat, passing out immediately. Cassio, Luciano, Sasha, and my brothers kept their guns trained on the men, watching as Marchetti’s men disbursed.

Once gone, Aiden returned his attention to me, the twins right at his side. I looked at my brothers hesitantly, unsure where to start.

“Do you hate me?” I rasped as my pulse fluttered. My eyes roamed over my brother’s face while the twins’ eyes darted between the two of us. The grim expression on Aiden’s face didn’t bode well for me nor Luca.

Aiden cupped my cheeks. “I’m not mad at you. You were just a kid, but you should have told me when you remembered.”

I swallowed. He was right. Except, I didn’t want to cause them pain. Mother’s betrayal would have hurt them all.

“Luca was a kid too,” I whispered softly. “Please don’t kill him.”

“Nobody is going to kill my brother,” Cassio threatened with a growl. There was so much growling and testosterone, I was drowning in it.

“What the fuck is going on?” Kyran grumbled.

Aiden shook his head. “I’ll update you on our way home.” My big brother’s eyes focused on me. “I won’t kill him. For you and for my niece. But Sister, you can’t keep taking off on us. Work out this shit with your husband. One way or another. Stay with him or come home.” It wasn’t an unreasonable request. “Work. Your. Shit. Out.”

I sighed. “You’re right,” I admitted in a whisper. “But there is one more thing you need to know.”

“Yes?”

My eyes flicked to the twins. I worried about their reaction, but I couldn't keep any more secrets. They were always Mother's favorite. Neither Aiden nor I minded it. We were never close to Mother.

"Luca killed Mother."

"He what?" Tyran and Kyran growled at the same time.

"When she threatened mine and Penelope's life, Luca lost it." I realized I was justifying him. The truth was that I'd forgive that man anything. Except putting our daughter in danger.

But it turned out, he kept us protected even while we were on the run. He defended me even in his state.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Kyran hissed. "You're defending a man who killed our mother!"

My heart squeezed. I knew they'd take it hard. They'd always been closer to Mother than I was.

"Please, try to understand," I rasped. "She wasn't as perfect as you think. She was cheating on Da with Benito King."

My brothers' jaws tightened and their expressions darkened. Silence was ominous.

"Jesus Christ," Aiden muttered, breaking the silence. "Tell your husband that his killing members of our family ends with our mother. I find out he's laid a finger on you, I'm coming for him. Agreement or no about Callahans in Italy."

Yep, that was my family. Ride or die. No matter what. I should have known they'd keep us safe.

I wrapped my arms around all three of my brothers. "I missed you all so much. I have to take Luca back to Sicily, but I promise I'll keep in touch." I took a step back and wiped my nose with the back of my hand. It wasn't graceful at all. "She knows you all. We talked about family and uncles every day."

The three of them kissed me on the forehead. "Go take care of your husband," Aiden urged. "We have the rest of our lives to catch up."

I watched their backs as they disappeared into the night, then turned to face the three men still here. Sasha, Luciano, and Cassio remained with me.

"You three will have to squeeze in the backseat." With a grumble, they opened the backdoor and readied to shove their big frames in, when I remembered. "Cassio, you sit next to Penelope. She'll know your face if she wakes. She won't know theirs."

He paused, then nodded.

As they crammed into the back, I rushed around the car and closed the door and got behind the steering wheel. Penelope was still fast asleep in her seat. I reached behind the seat for the blanket I tucked in there and covered Luca. He was still only wearing boxers and the temperatures weren't as warm anymore.

I hit the gas and sent the car flying down the road. I quickly connected to Bluetooth and called Nonno. The last thing we needed was for him to assume we failed and attack Marchetti, causing more trouble. More debts to be paid.

My pulse spiked when he picked up after the second ring.

"Where are you?" Nonno asked at once.

I glanced at Luca who was slumped against the passenger door, breathing shallowly, then my eyes flickered to the rearview mirror to find Cassio watching me.

"We're coming home," I rasped out. "We're on our way."

"Marchetti let him go?" Nonno asked incredulously. I guess the guy wasn't known for mercy.

"Yes."

"What did you promise him?"

I swallowed hard. "I told him I'd uphold the arrangement between our kids."

Silence stretched. I wondered why Cassio wasn't saying anything. His eyes were locked on Penelope, studying her with a soft expression. The other two had their lids shut. Maybe those days in the basement drained them all. Glancing in the rearview mirror, Cassio's gaze flickered to me, but he remained silent.

"Where are you? I'll send a helicopter."

"We're just leaving Rome."

"Margaret." Nonno's voice was soft. "I owe you. We owe you. We wronged you, but we can make it right."

Somehow all that seemed irrelevant now. Years alone with Penelope gave me a different perspective on what mattered and what didn't. Luca made an arrangement to save me. I couldn't fault him for it. Cassio set me up, but he was never the one for me. This man next to me was. My life belonged to him from the moment he saved that little five-year-old girl.

“None of that matters,” I told him. “I just want Luca to get through this. Then we’ll go from there.”

Hopefully my marriage was salvageable.

“He never stopped looking for you,” Nonno said quietly. “If I knew Marchetti was keeping you hidden all along, I’d have asked him for mercy sooner.”

Tears stung in my eyes. Nonno was a proud man and he’d have asked Marchetti for a favor just to bring us home.

“Prima la famiglia,” he said softly over the line. “Family first and foremost.”

I let out a shuddering breath. Nonno was family. He’d been family from the moment I met him.

My chest ached with emotions as I regarded the man beside me. My husband. His dark hair stuck to his bloody forehead. His body was covered in blood too.

“Tell me where to meet you,” I said. I couldn’t discuss the past now. I just wanted to get us out of here. I needed to see my daughter and husband to safety.

He gave me an address outside the city. I pulled over and keyed it into the GPS, then continued driving.

About one hour later, I steered the car toward a deserted parking lot where a helicopter was already waiting. So was Nonno with his guards. I came to a stop. Cassio and his friends immediately jumped out of the car. He rushed to the front seat to check Luca’s vitals then gripped him under the arms.

Luca groaned and woke up Penelope who let out a wail seeing an unfamiliar surroundings and the faces of Luciano and Sasha who she didn’t know.

“You took her with you to go get him,” Nonno rasped, eyeing me like I had lost my mind.

“My brothers met me there,” I explained, not that I owed him an explanation. “Besides, you said he wanted both of us. So we were both there.”

Cassio opened his mouth but Luciano put his palm on Cassio’s shoulder.

“She kept her safe for three years on her own,” he reasoned with his best friend, taking my side. “They are here. She saved him. Let’s get them back to Sicily.”

“You’re right,” Cassio said. “Help me carry him.” His dark eyes came to me and Penelope. “You need help with my niece?”

I shook my head. “I got her.” My heart thundering in my chest, I walked to the back door and opened it to unbuckle my daughter. “Shh,” I soothed her. “Everything is okay.”

I quickly lifted her then straightened and all together we walked toward the helicopter. Penelope pressed herself against me but her hand reached out to her father’s and she took it into hers. Her eyes locked on Luca, refusing to let him out of her sight.

“Mine,” she said as the helicopter lifted into the air.

She certainly got that possessive trait from her father.

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Chapter Fifty-Two

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LUCA

My body ached like a motherfucker.

It didn't compare to the pain behind my eyelids, and I suspected it had nothing to do with the light pouring through the windows and everything from spending the last three days under Marchetti's torture.

The secrets were out. My wife and child were no longer hidden. Fuck, my wife came for me. She saved my life. Why? She knew it was me who shot her beloved father and yet, she still came for me.

The scent of citrus, olives, and land drifted through the breeze. I didn't need to open my eyelids to know. I could smell it in the air. I was back in Sicily.

Peeling my eyes open, I found Cassio sitting in the chair next to my bed, staring at me.

"Finally. I thought you'd nap the day away," he grumbled.

"You're not that lucky," I gritted out. I shifted and sat up, the throbbing in my body refusing to cease. "You look like you need a bath and nap, big brother." He just flipped me the bird. "Where are my wife and daughter?"

Maybe they disappeared again. I didn't think I could survive another three years without them. Heck, I didn't think I could last another day without them. I needed them back.

"They are with Nonno," he said slowly. "Penelope talks to us like she's always known us." My throat squeezed. "Of course, she likes Nonno the best, although she's been asking about you."

"About me?" I repeated, trying to understand why she would ask about me. She didn't even know me. The bitterness slithered through my veins

like poison. My daughter didn't know me. I missed out on so much.

"Yes, about you." Cassio touched my shoulder, holding my gaze. "Want me to go get them?"

I nodded.

They were here. In our home. So close, yet they felt too far away. I hoped to see her again, but deep down I feared it'd never happen. And now, she was so close that I needed to see her.

"My daughter," I murmured, tasting the word on my lips. "Penelope." I met my brother's gaze. "I never thought I'd see them again. I hoped but… fuck," I breathed.

"She has your eyes," Cassio said. "Looks like her mother but when she smiles, she's all you. The mischievousness. She'll be a little rebel."

My heart expanded in my chest and my expression softened. My daughter was back with me.

"I have to get everything for a three-year-old. I don't even know what she likes. Barbies maybe?"

Cassio smiled. "Ask her. She won't have any qualms telling you."

My brother stood up and left the room to go get my family while my chest thundered with excitement and another feeling.

An unsettling feeling.

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Chapter Fifty-Three

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MARGARET

Dé-jà vu.

We came full circle. I watched Penelope move around plants as Nonno directed her with a soft smile on his face. He was enamored with his great-granddaughter who chatted to him like she'd known him forever.

Three years ago, Luca and my story, our second chance, started here. Our life began here. Not at Temptation nor in Vegas. Not the day he killed my father. But right here. This island was the first time I got a glimpse of the real him and saw the man who could make me happy.

Once I learned that Marchetti had known where we were all along, I realized I had made a miscalculation. A grave mistake.

Three years were lost and it was all for nothing.

I thought I was protecting our daughter. Instead, I led us into more danger. We were at Marchetti's mercy the whole time, and I was oblivious to it.

Luca wasn't innocent in all this either. It didn't make any of this better though.

Cassio came onto the terrace and sat down next to Nonno.

"Ciao, Zio Cassio," Penelope greeted him with a grin, never missing a beat.

Nonno smiled. "Ah my little Penelope, *vieni*." Penelope didn't understand so he repeated it in English. "Come."

Getting to her feet, she strutted to Nonno. "Vieni," she repeated, testing the word on her lips.

"That's right. You'll learn Italian fast, piccola Penelope."

Enthralled with everything Nonno, she paid me little attention. I looked up to find Cassio's eyes on me.

"Luca's awake."

Without thinking, I got up to my feet and Penelope's attention shifted to me. For a moment I debated whether Luca and I should have a conversation alone after all these years apart, but it seemed cruel to keep Penelope away from him for a second longer.

"Penelope, want to go talk to daddy?" I asked her. I wouldn't force her. There have been a lot of changes over the last twenty-four hours. New country. New home. New faces.

But my little girl was already nodding her head excitedly.

He was in his old bedroom. The room that would have been ours if we'd have ever made it back to Sicily together. We entered the bedroom, hand in hand, finding Luca sitting back against the headboard.

He looked better. There was color to his skin, but his face was still bruised. He wore a shirt but there were bruises hiding underneath that also.

Luca's eyes met mine and the world stopped turning. Everything came to a standstill, including my heartbeat. Everything faded, leaving me in his darkness.

"Pàpa has a boo-boo?" Penelope's voice tore through the air and both of us turned our attention to him.

"Yes, but he'll be better," I murmured softly, then glanced back at Luca. My heart skipped a beat, seeing the look in his eyes. He watched her, stunned and with so many emotions - love, reverence, happiness - that I felt my throat tightened with a mix of happiness and wistfulness.

We moved closer to the bed, and all the while he watched our daughter as if he was scared she would disappear.

I sat down on the bed next to him and lifted our daughter to do the same, placing her in front of me.

"Hello, Pàpa."

Luca's expression held wonder and so much tenderness, and suddenly I knew even if the two of us didn't find our way back to each other, this was the right move.

He reached out his hand and stroked Penelope's cheek gently.

"Hello, princess." I watched him swallow, fighting his emotions. He might have qualms about me, but he had zero about our daughter. "You speak so well. Last time I–" His voice choked and he cleared his throat

before he continued. “You were a baby last time I saw you. You fit in the palm of my hand.”

Penelope watched him alert, her eyes so much like her fathers, that it brought tears to my eyes. Seeing the two of them like this was the most beautiful sight I had seen in years and my heart twisted with so many emotions, it was hard to find words.

“Mommy and I missed you, Pàpa,” she finally said. “I’m not a baby.”

Luca raised his eyes, locking them with mine. “I missed you too,” he rasped. “And you’ll always be my baby.”

A lone tear rolled down my cheek, and I knew we were exactly where we needed to be.

Our daughter belonged to both of us. We’d both lay down our lives for her.

WE’D BEEN in Sicily for two weeks.

Luca recovered well, but somehow we had yet to find ourselves alone. I had kept my distance. Once Penelope reunited with her Pàpa, nothing could stop her from visiting him. Nonno and Pàpa were her two most favorite men in the world. She told me so herself.

Luciano and Sasha left the first day we were back. Cassio had gone back to his family, leaving our little family to come to terms with everything we’d done and hadn’t done.

I sat on the bed, as FaceTime rang on my phone.

“Margaret.”

My brother’s face came on the screen. The face I’d known all my life.

“Is now a good time to talk?” He nodded. “Do the twins hate me?”

His eyes flickered to the side. “You can ask them yourself.”

The twins' faces filled the screen, their expressions softening with love and tenderness. And I broke down. I cried because they lost a mother they loved. I cried because we lived all those years apart. I cried because I longed for their forgiveness.

“I’m sorry.” The words trembled and so did my lips. I wanted to hug them.

“Don’t apologize,” Tyran said. “We’d do anything for you. Your husband’s sin is eased by the fact that he saved you from his father. If we’d have lost you that same day, our family wouldn’t have been the same. As far as Ma goes…”

He didn’t finish, letting his sentence trail off.

“Ma betrayed us all,” Kyran muttered. I knew it was hard for them. They loved Ma and she loved them.

“You still loved her though,” I murmured. “It doesn’t make it any easier.”

A somber mood filled the video screen. It would take some time for them to come to terms with it.

“How is my niece adjusting?” Aiden switched subjects.

I smiled. “She loves it here. Now that we are seeing the faces we talked about, she’s demanding to see her Uncle Aiden, Tyran, and Kyran.”

“Smart girl,” Tyran drawled.

“Will you visit us?” A sigh filled the screen. I wasn’t sure whose it was.

“I think we need some time,” Aiden said. I swallowed. They were mad, not that I could blame them. I kept so much from them.

“Forgive me.”

“Maggie, we’d forgive you anything,” Kyran said softly. The door to my bedroom opened and I looked over my shoulder. Luca stood there, leaning against it and in full sight of the screen. “But him…” I returned my gaze to the screen and Kyran’s eyes watched Luca. “... I cannot forgive him. He took too much from me. From us.”

The lump in my throat grew. Aiden and Tyran didn’t contradict him, somber expressions on their faces.

“I don’t want to lose you,” I choked out.

“You won’t,” Aiden assured, his voice hoarse. “You’ll always be our family. Penelope will always be our family. But for now, it is best we don’t visit your home and your husband doesn’t visit ours.”

My family. The love. It felt so fractured at the moment, but I knew I was where I belonged. Luca and Penelope were my family. My world.

“Thank you for…” I couldn’t find the word. Or feeling. “Thank you for being the best brothers a girl could ask for.”

A terse nod and the call ended.

I released a sharp breath, my lungs constricting. After the call ended, I stared at the dark screen until Luca came up behind me.

He didn’t hug me. He didn’t touch me. Yet, his presence comforted me.

“You can visit them whenever you want.”

I met Luca’s eyes. It was the first time we’d been alone since we reunited.

“And Penelope?” I asked. “Can she visit them with me whenever she wants?”

A muscle in his jaw twitched. “No. She’s never leaving my sight again.”

I knew he fought the impulse to tell me off. He just got her back and worried about losing her again. I didn’t expect a different reaction, but it still shattered my heart.

He was okay with getting rid of me. The revelation that he was okay to live without me sent a raw ache through my chest.

How fitting.

The heartbreak I held at bay for almost three years came crashing down like a tsunami crashing against the shorelines.

It was destructive and merciless, leaving nothing in its wake.

Yet, I refused to just settle. I wouldn’t live the rest of our lives like two strangers, being civilized to each other just for our daughter’s sake.

“You can’t blame me for all of it,” I croaked. His expression darkened. “Yes, I fucked up, Luca. But so did you. The lies, betrayal. Do you think it was easy to leave?” I choked, fighting my tears from rolling down my face.

“It seemed you left without a problem.” His voice was judgmental. Accusing. Bitter.

I swallowed. “That’s not fair.”

God, were we over before we even truly began? Our second chance was null and void. I hoped the third chance at love would be our happily ever after. But hope was for fools.

“You’re right, the blame is not only on you.” My eyes snapped to him in surprise. I waited, scared that I heard him wrong. Or maybe misunderstood him. “I went back to that day so many times and wished I’d told you.”

Hope bloomed in my chest. Did he mean it?

My tongue swept over my bottom lip. “Since I learned Marchetti knew all along where we were, I wished I thought it through too. That I’d confronted you.”

Demons danced around us, dangling the ghosts of our pasts.

“I’m sorry you missed her first two years,” I whispered. “There wasn’t a day where you weren’t mentioned. Whatever I know about you, Penelope

does too. She knows you held her at night when she was born. She knows you sang her songs when she fussed. And she loves you so goddamn much."

"I know." Our gazes held, the intensity in his eyes shaking me to my core. "She said you love me."

My daughter's admission inadvertently left me feeling raw, but I refused to cower. I couldn't hide anymore.

"I do," I admitted softly. "It took a while to recognize it, but how could I not love you?"

It was hard to read his expression. He kept himself closed off. Protected.

"Even though I killed your Da?" he asked. I nodded. Maybe it made me a betrayer in our world, but Luca was a kid. I couldn't put those sins on his shoulders. Da wouldn't have either. In my heart, I knew it was the reason he didn't pull the trigger. "Despite the fact I killed your mother?"

I nodded again. "You protected our daughter from her," I rasped. "I would have done the same."

I watched his Adam's apple shift and I prayed. I freaking prayed that he'd hear the truth in my voice.

"About Marchetti… I know you tried to protect us too," I continued. "If I could go back, I would have handled it differently," I admitted.

God, almost three years wasted. Could a person forgive that? Could a father forgive that? I robbed him of three years of our daughter's life.

"I won't let Marchetti have her," Luca rasped. Conflict and confusion waged in me at his statement. I didn't want a war. "I'll find a way to break that arrangement."

"Marchetti agreed if the kids don't love each other, we'll have a way out," I said. "The likelihood is slim they'll fall in love."

"Every woman that marries a Marchetti, dies," he gritted. "I'll find a way to break that agreement."

The determination on his face told me he meant it.

"Then we'll do it together."

I meant those words, although my chest ached.

My husband didn't love me.

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Chapter Fifty-Four

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LUCA

It had been two weeks since she had rescued me.

We had fallen into an uneasy routine. Penelope was the only one oblivious to it.

As Marchetti tortured me, I thought of nothing else but my family. My daughter. My wife. About seeing them just one more time before I died.

And now, they were here. With me. I saw my beautiful baby girl smiling and happy. She *knew* me. She *knew* Nonno.

Despite the anger of missing out on years of my daughter's life, it'd be hard to ignore the fact that Margaret raised our baby well. She was kind-hearted, happy, and so fucking beautiful. For hours, Margaret's words vibrated in my chest.

We'll do it together.

It was what we should have done all along. We would have saved each other so much heartache and problems. But we couldn't go back. We were here and the only thing ahead of us was the future.

She loves me. Her words were hard to believe yet my heart soaked up those three little words. *She loves me.*

I loved her too. So fucking much that it hurt to breathe. Every single day without her had been torture. There were days I struggled to believe they were here, and I'd go check on them.

Just to be sure I wasn't dreaming.

I strode into my daughter's bedroom to find her sleeping, her curly black hair sprawled over the pillows and covers tossed onto the floor. Even in her sleep she smiled.

Picking up the blanket off the floor, I covered her small body. Her eyes fluttered open.

“Pàpa,” she murmured sleepily.

“Shhh,” I rasped softly. “Go back to sleep, princess.”

She sighed and turned to the side. “Night, Pàpa.”

“Good night, my little princess.”

Keeping my steps soft, I exited her room and headed for my wife’s bedroom.

Dé-jà vu.

It took me back to those days when I watched her sleep under her mother’s roof. So much for personal growth.

I took a seat on the couch, on the right side of her bed. She slept as I remembered. She slept like our daughter. On her side, with a soft smile on her lips. The moon’s light glowed through the window, reflecting against her dark hair. The moon cast her in a soft glow, making her look like the Madonna from one of the old renaissance paintings.

I loved her. With every breath. With every heartbeat. With every thought.

The moment the eyes of that five-year-old girl connected with mine, I wanted to protect her. Those ocean blue depths fascinated me. Something in her eyes spoke to me. That night in Temptation, I knew she was mine. I had been hers all along.

She wanted to go back to her family. I couldn’t let that happen.

My heart twisted with pain.

I just got her back and she already wanted to leave me. With my daughter!

Lost in thought, I watched my wife sleep, the even rise and fall of her chest as she slept. At least she had enough peace to sleep. After years of restlessness while searching for her, sleep was hard to find.

“What are you doing here?” Her soft voice pulled my attention back to her.

My lips twisted. I had been sitting in her room every night once I received enough. It was the only peace I found at night.

“You look beautiful, mia bella,” I murmured, watching her. She didn’t move, her body stilled as she kept her eyes glued to me.

“Why are you here?” she demanded quietly, ignoring my compliment. Her expression was soft, but cautious. As if she worried that my next words

would hurt her.

A sardonic breath left me. I'd rather cut my dick off than hurt her. She was everything to me. *Mia vita.* My life.

"Because I can't let you go." Something tired lingered behind my eyes and my words. The last three years had aged me. I was fucking exhausted. "Because I love you. Because I fucking need you so much that it steals my breath away."

The meaning of the words drifted through the bedroom. Hers. It should be ours, but we'd kept separate bedrooms so far.

Her eyes grabbed hold and hung on.

"What's different now?" she said quietly. "You didn't react to my declaration of love earlier."

My jaw tightened. As far as I was concerned, it was pretty fucking simple. The two of us belonged together. We were meant to be together. I loved her so fucking much that I couldn't stand to be away from her for a day. Yet, she stayed away from me for almost three damn years.

It made me feel weak. Unwanted. Not enough.

A heavy sigh filled the night.

"You need to go to your room and sleep, Luca." She sounded resigned. Almost sad. "You need to be certain, and I don't think you are. You want Penelope, I'm not sure that you want me."

My gaze coasted above her head, my jaw ticking in thought.

"I am sure of my love for you, Margaret," I told her. "I've known you were the one for a long time."

She waited, her deep pools of blue studying me.

"I can't sleep without you. I can't sleep without hearing you breathe. Three years without you in my bed were torturous," I admitted. She gasped softly. "I can't live without you. I love you." I let the words drift through the air and towards my wife. I needed her to believe me. "I loved you when you shot me. I loved you when you glared at me. I've loved you for such a long time, Margaret DiMauro, that I don't know how not to love you."

The words filled the darkness and danced through the air, as her eyes watched me and I held my breath.

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Chapter Fifty-Five

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MARGARET

It was so much more than just a dark hazel gaze. It was late nights and whispering soothing words to our daughter, rough hands and dirty promises, heavy hearts and memories.

"You and Penelope are everything to me," he rasped.

My heart thundered hard under my chest. All the feelings flooded my senses, leaving years of frustration, physical, sexual and mental, behind with only one sentence that mattered.

I rose to my feet and padded toward him barefoot. Warmth ran through my veins. The empty ache between my legs pulsed. But the most rattling was this feeling in my chest. My heart fluttered wildly, like a butterfly captured in a jar.

He had captured me, and I had no desire to flee.

I brushed a hand across his neck and into his thick hair at his nape. My fingers laced through the soft strands, gripping it hard. Our daughter might have my hair color, but she had her Pàpa's curls.

"I love you too," I murmured softly.

Before I had even finished the statement, Luca was on his feet. His hands grabbed two handfuls of my ass and lifted me up. My legs wrapped around his waist. His mouth slammed hard against mine.

My back hit the wall, swishing all the breath from my lungs. The force of the impact rattled my bones, his need to possess me consuming. Drowning.

"I'm taking you to our bedroom," he gritted against my mouth.

“Yes!” I didn’t care where he took me as long as he kept kissing me. He carried me down the hall to his room and the door slammed behind us. Luca’s body pressed against mine, stripping off my nightgown and then my panties.

“I’m going to tie your wrists with your panties,” he grunted as he bound my wrists, then lifted my arms over my head until I was on my tiptoes, and my body arched into his.

“What?” I blinked confused.

“This is your punishment for leaving me,” he gritted the words out between his teeth. “You always complained about me destroying your panties. I didn’t destroy them this time, but I’ll use them to keep you from touching me as part of your punishment.”

Heat pulsed between my legs, going straight to my core.

“I’ll make it good for you. I promise I will,” he vowed.

He nudged my legs apart and to my embarrassment, the evidence of my arousal trickled down my inner thighs. His eyes flickered with something dark as he watched the glistening of my arousal. Then he inhaled deeply and closed his eyes.

“You smell just as I remembered,” he rasped so faintly I wasn’t certain I heard him right.

Then as if he realized he slipped, he pushed his thigh roughly between my legs. My hips ground against it and a hum of approval vibrated through his chest. He pressed harder against my pussy, my pulsing need throbbing against his hard muscles. I rode his thigh like my life depended on it. Pleasure coiled beneath my skin, burning in the pit of my stomach. My eyes fluttered shut and my head fell back, my hips bucking and grinding. I was so close.

He yanked my hair, his fingers gripping my strands so hard it burned my scalp.

“You watch me as you fall apart,” he grunted, slamming his mouth on mine in a bruising kiss. He ended it before it really started. “Me. So you know who your pleasure belongs to.”

His voice was dark. Raspy. Possessive. It matched the look in his eyes.

My insides twisted. There was something so fucking hot and erotic about this. About every rough word and hard kiss. About the way he owned my body, even after all this time.

His breath brushed against my lips. The heat bloomed inside me, licking every inch of my skin and threatening to erupt like a volcano. Desire coursed through my veins until I was ablaze.

I needed him to kiss me again, his lips on mine devouring me. Roughly. Gently. I didn't care, as long as I could have him. Right here. Right now. Everything else be damned. At least for this fleeting moment.

His one hand encapsulated my bound wrists while the other traced down the length of my arms. Torturously slow.

His mouth crashed down on mine and my lips parted. It was a welcomed intrusion. It was three years of loneliness. Three years of pain. It all poured out into this kiss. He pushed his tongue into my mouth and a groan left me.

So exhilarating.

My thighs clenched. My pussy throbbed.

"Does your pussy remember my cock?" he grunted against my lips. When I didn't answer, he gripped my thighs harder, grinding me against his thigh, causing the most delicious friction. "Does it?"

"Yes."

It was so torturously good. I was quickly riding the wave, reaching for the peak as heat rushed through my veins.

"Mmm," he rumbled, our tongues tangling. His tongue slid across mine ,and I sucked on it greedily. A rough sound came from deep in his chest in approval.

He raked his teeth along the bottom of my lip, as his hands trailed up my back, only to come back down my neck, over my breasts. Like he had to touch me everywhere.

My heart pounded in my ears. His lips molded into mine. His tongue licked every inch of my mouth, stroking mine. I nipped at his lip, my body grinding against his. I needed more of this. More of him.

His fingers in my hair tugged and pulled before he licked a trail over my jaw until he nipped at my earlobe.

"I missed you so fucking much," he rasped roughly into my ear. "I've been waiting for you," he growled. "There's been no other women for me."

"I've been waiting for you too," I breathed. "I kept my vow."

His eyes burned and the haze in the air thickened, our every inhale stoking the flame.

Luca nipped my ear as he pulled back, the sharp slice of pain causing me to mewl. He took a small step back and unbuckled his belt with one hand. Next the button of his pants opened, the zipper sending a seductive echo through the room. His boxers followed, leaving his glorious naked body in full view. My tongue darted, wetting my lips. Just the sight of him was enough to shatter me. Then hooked my thigh onto his hip.

God, I forgot how big he was. Hard. Smooth. That piercing that had haunted me since that first time we slept together in Vegas was now in my sights.

Panic should overwhelm my senses. I was at his mercy. But the way he watched me promised so much pleasure that fear was nowhere to be found.

“There is no life apart for us. Ever again,” he grunted, stroking his dick. “I’m going to fuck you into oblivion. Keep you tied to our bed, ready for me. I’ll ruin you, so you never think of anything else. Just my dick inside your tight, greedy pussy.”

And I… I kept nodding, my eyes on his shaft. That temptation that brought so much pleasure. There was nowhere else I’d ever be.

“Do that again,” I pleaded, whimpering.

Something flared in his eyes and his fingers tightened around his shaft. He stroked it again, his eyes half-lidded. Once, twice, and as he did it again, he traced the glistening head over the bottom of my stomach, leaving a hot, wet trail down my belly.

“Your pussy wants it,” he grunted. “Your cunt wants to be destroyed by me. It remembers me.”

A shudder ghosted through me and another moan slipped through my lips. I wanted to beg him to fuck me already, but I knew if I pushed him, he’d prolong it. Make me suffer. Panting, I watched as he guided himself to my entrance, the tip of his shaft searing my pussy.

God, I needed him. My hips arched just a tad and his shaft entered me barely an inch, but it was enough for my pussy to start convulsing. Abstinence was a bitch. It made my body too weak. Too eager.

Luca didn’t seem to mind though. In one powerful thrust, he pushed all the way inside me, through my clenching pussy and his loud groan mixed with my moans. His hands came to my hips, his fingers digging into my soft flesh. His mouth pressed against mine. Hard. Bruising my lips.

“I can’t hold back.” It was the first and last warning.

Just as I opened my mouth to beg him not to hold back, he started moving. Pounding into me. The air buzzed, fireworks exploded and the world disappeared as he ground himself impossibly deeper.

He licked and nipped my lips. He eased out, only to slam back in. Roughly. Violently. Moans and grunts filled the space.

No sooner had the first orgasm washed through me, another one started building with each hard thrust of him.

“More,” I moaned, throwing my bound wrists over his head, then pulling him closer.

“Who’s fucking you?” He grunted with each thrust.

“You.”

I had never felt him so deep. His hands slid behind me and cupped my ass, angling his cock deeper inside me. With brutal force, he fucked me like a madman.

“Whose pussy is this?”

“Yours.”

He pulled his cock all the way out only to pound into me again. He was merciless. As if he tried to wipe out years of sexual frustration.

“Mine,” he grunted. “This cunt,” he said with another deep thrust. “Mine.”

“These lips.” My breath mewled as he bit down on my lip. He picked up the pace of his thrusts. “Mine. You are all mine, Wife.”

The world faded. Reality fuzzed with each rut of his body.

The only thing I could feel right now was the heat deep in my core. His pleasure. His pain. My pleasure. Our pain.

“Mine,” he groaned as my pussy squeezed around him.

“More,” I begged, and he fucked me faster, harder, deeper. The friction of our bodies echoed in the room, flesh against flesh slapping. Again and again.

“Give it to me,” he growled with one deep thrust.

So deep that it choked my cry as I came undone.

The orgasm was immediate and so violent it sent a shudder through me and my vision dimmed. Heat pulsed in my stomach branching out until it reached every single corner of my body.

Everything faded away but the heat of the pleasure. It was too much and not enough. He continued fucking me, faster and faster with his incoherent guttural curses. He yanked my hair, forcing my face to tilt up to his. His

mouth slammed on mine just as he thickened before spurting inside me. His cum filled me as he came, his own shudders rolling down his body.

Our eyes connected.

“I love you.”

We both said the words at the same time, and I knew we’d be okay.

No matter what, we’d get through this together.

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Chapter Fifty-Six

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LUCA

My wife's face pressed against my chest.

I wrapped an arm around her, our fingers linked. Just like our hearts. I held our hands up, and it was only then that I had noticed. We both still wore our wedding rings.

Peace, unlike any I had felt for the past three years, filled my chest.

"What are you thinking?" she murmured, her voice soft and her lips brushing against my chest.

"That I'm scared," I admitted. Fuck it, maybe it made me weak, but it was the truth. She and our daughter were my strength and my weakness.

She lifted her head, her brows furrowed. "Why?"

I cupped her cheek. "I want this life with you and our daughter," I murmured. "I had so many secrets. I made so many mistakes."

"*We* made mistakes, Luca," she rasped. "We both did."

"I killed your parents. For the past three years, I lived with the conviction that you hated me. That you'd make our daughter hate me." She didn't stop me. "I thought I'd lost you, and then you came to save me. Now you've lost your brothers. You lost your family."

"I have you. Our family. You, Penelope, Nonno, and I." She leaned into my palm, her eyes locked on me. "My brothers are still my brothers. They still love me and their niece. As far as you go, they'll come around. I know they will. You saved me and I saved you. That's what we'll do. We'll protect our family."

I pulled her in for a kiss. "Fuck, I should have been honest with you. We wouldn't have lost all those years."

“And I should have trusted you,” she croaked. “We both fucked up. No more living in the past. Let’s move forward. For us. For our daughter. From now on, we will stick together. Rain or shine. Rich or poor. Lies or truths. We are stronger together than we are apart.”

Together. That sounded perfect.

“And I’m sorry for shooting you,” she continued. “For being so stubborn.”

My lips twitched. “Don’t be. I decided that night I’d marry you.”

She chuckled softly, shaking her head and her curls bouncing. “Only you would take that as a challenge.”

“I can’t help it. I have loved you for too long.” I still couldn’t believe this. I couldn’t believe that she loved me. That she wanted us together. *Forever.* “I’ll find a way to break the arrangement with Marchetti,” I said harshly. “I’d rather die than see her with the Marchetti last name attached to her.”

She kissed me fiercely. “We, Luca. We will find a way to protect her.”

I fucked up. We fucked up. I didn’t care where the blame lay as long as my wife and our daughter were mine. I was theirs. I’d make sure never to betray their love and trust again.

And if anyone dared to take my family away from me, I’d show them how far I was willing to go.

I’d show Marchetti how far I’d go to keep my daughter outside his clutches.

WEEKS FLEW by and Halloween rolled around.

Margaret was busy with Áine, Grace, and my sister baking birthday cakes. Yes, cakes. She got it into her head to celebrate three birthdays in one day. It was my wife’s idea to make up for the lost time.

Penelope’s birthday was today. With Bianca in the kitchen, I was certain we’d have at least one cake we could eat. While my wife became an excellent cook, she struggled with baking.

“You look good,” Cassio remarked as I took my seat on the terrace.

“I am good.”

“How does it feel to run the Sicilian mafia?” Luciano asked. “Makes you sound so badass.”

“I *am* a badass,” I pointed out.

“Mr. Badass, the one who insisted on only having one night stands, ends up falling the hardest,” Nico taunted. I kept my gaze on my daughter. “I knew you and Sasha would be the biggest suckers. The fucking craziest.”

I shrugged, while Sasha flipped him the middle finger. Truthfully, neither one of us cared, as long as we had our family with us.

Nonno, Luciano’s father, Luciano, Nico, Alessio, the Nikolaev brothers, Raphael - they all came to share the day with us. Family, friends, and the two humans I’d burn this world down for all under one roof. Life was good.

I watched my daughter play with Luciano’s little girl, sharing her gardening toys. The two followed Nonno’s directions, smiling widely, ignoring dirt smears on their clothes. Nico’s twin boys helped too.

My daughter’s eyes lifted and our gazes met. She jumped to her feet, ran to me, and hugged me.

“Hey, princess,” I greeted her. “Ready for the big party?”

Her eyes lit up and she nodded. “You’ll stay, right?”

Sometimes she worried I’d disappear. I had the same fear, but with each day the fear dimmed and my happiness grew.

“I’m never leaving you, princess,” I swore.

“I love you, Pàpa.”

I pressed a kiss to her temple. “I love you more than life itself. Always remember that,” I said softly. I’d uttered those words often since I’d gotten her back. I wanted her to always remember that.

“And I’ll never leave you, Pàpa,” she echoed.

“I’m happy to hear it,” I said, smiling. Her love was my biggest reward in this life. She always watched me with so much trust in her eyes that it made my heart swell.

She went back to her group of friends to play.

“You know that’s not true,” Cassio, always the practical one, noted. “All our kids will leave us eventually.”

A round of grumbles traveled around. None of us liked to think about the day our children would leave us to go and make their own mark in this world. We wanted to hold on to our family and keep them in our bubble - protected and safe.

Marchetti’s deal still lingered like a dark cloud, but thankfully he kept his distance. So did I. He got his commissions and true to Margaret’s word to the Bitter Prince, I’d already routed some of my shipments to his port. A DiMauro always paid his debts, and I’d be no different.

“This is close to perfection,” I murmured to myself, but my friends heard it too.

“Everyone who matters is with us,” Cassio agreed, indicating the people who joined our extended family and friends. Regardless if they were here or not.

“And we’d protect them all with our lives,” Nico said.

Penelope and Francesca shared a glance and giggled, their expressions bright. Matteo and Bianca’s twin girls stormed through the field and around us.

My daughter’s smile got me every time. She and my wife, our family, were what mattered to me more than anything else in this world.

They had my heart. They’d always have it.

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EPILOGUE

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Luca - Seven Years Later

Margaret's eyes traveled over the busy courtyard of the grand opening of St. Jean d'Arc School. It was a big deal and the interest was great. I was glad Wynter DiLustro and her wild friends ended up allowing me to invest.

It'd ensure my kids got in. Especially my eldest who was the kindest and most sensitive of all our children.

We were pregnant again. It'd be our fourth child, and my wife swore it was the last baby. I wasn't quite sure if I was ready to call it quits though. I loved seeing my wife glow with happiness and her belly growing with our child.

"I don't know about sending our daughter somewhere so far away for school, Luca."

"Penelope won't be ready for another five to seven years, mia bella," I comforted Margaret. "This school will teach her self-defense and how to protect herself."

A shadow passed my wife's expression, and it gutted me every time.

So far we hadn't succeeded in finding a way to break off the arrangement with Marchetti. Thankfully the dickward stayed the fuck way.

But he was like a looming dark shadow, always present.

I pulled my pregnant wife closer to me and kissed her forehead. "She's only ten. We have time."

She rubbed her belly, her eyes studying all the people here.

"Why can't you teach her to fight?" Margaret protested. "Or I could, once we're done having kids."

“Mia bella, I could never teach her without worrying I’d hurt her,” I reasoned. “I’d go easy on her because my instinct is to protect her.”

“You’re teaching the boys how to fight,” she pointed out. She was right about that, but it was different with boys. Besides, when they were devils like mine, I used it to teach them a lesson. There was always a bigger devil than them out there. “I just worry about the distance. Maybe we can stay here more when she starts this school,” Margaret pondered, but she wasn’t fond of staying in the States.

We have been traveling back and forth between two continents, but once Penelope started school back in Sicily, Margaret came less and less. She preferred it that way. Now our sons would be starting school soon, and we’d be visiting this continent even less.

While Penelope was easygoing, our sons were a freaking nightmare. I loved them to death, but they were always in trouble. They had their mother’s eyes and damn if the little devils didn’t use it against me. I was looking forward to having a baby girl again.

“Can I go and play?” My older son, Damiano, asked in Italian, his eyes shining wildly. His younger brother, by a year, Armani and he probably couldn’t figure out what trouble to get into first.

“Speak English,” I told them. “And whatever hell you’re about to start, don’t get caught.”

Margaret smacked my forearm gently at the same time that our sons bolted.

“That was such bad advice,” she muttered. “They’ll get expelled even before they are old enough to start school here.”

I shrugged. “They’re boys”

I glanced at my eldest. Penelope stuck to me, her hand unwilling to let go of mine, her eyes darting here and there. However, she was cautious and nowhere near as excited as her brothers. Even at ten, she was reserved and shy.

She didn’t have my wife’s temperament, but she definitely had Nonno’s.

My heart clenched. We just lost him a year ago and the loss was still too fresh. Especially for Penelope who had become close to him.

My daughter was definitely more DiMauro than anything else, and I couldn’t be prouder of her.

“What do you think, princess?” I asked her.

Penelope's big eyes came to me, her fingers squeezing my hand. She didn't even realize she was doing it. I fucking hated seeing her worried or upset. It was hard to even send her to school back in Sicily without worrying about protection and everyone on that island wouldn't dare touch a single hair on her head.

"It's so far away from home, Pàpa," she murmured softly. "From all of you."

"It is," I agreed. "But we'll be a phone call away, and if you need us, we'll be here within a day. And don't forget. Your uncles all live close by. If you need help, they'd be here within hours and probably burn down the school for you."

She smiled softly. "Okay," she agreed. "If you think it's the right school, then I'll do what you think best."

"I do. It will teach you more than books can." She nodded, agreeing. Sometimes I wished she'd argue back and tell me *fuck no*, but she didn't have that personality. She was mischievous when it came to playtime and winning games. But outside the family, she put up firm walls and hid behind them. I worried it was our life in the underworld that terrified her. We had shielded her, but rumors of the mafiosos and what it entailed still reached her. "Besides, like I told your Mamma, you are years away from coming here."

Penelope spotted Luciano's daughter and a smile spread over her face when Francesca waved her over.

"Can I go, Pàpa?" she begged. Like I could ever deny her. Upon my nod, she rushed to her friend, and for a moment, we watched them speak in rushed tones like they hadn't seen each other in years. They only FaceTimed yesterday, and they saw each other last month.

I returned my attention to my wife who was watching our kids like the mamma bear she was.

"You know we should christen this place," I remarked casually, while my heart thundered wildly. She always made me feel like a little boy. When she looked at me confused, I elaborated. "You know, have sex in one of the dorm rooms."

"Luca!"

"What?" I challenged. "You know some wild shit will be going on here. We better get ahead of the game and do it before anyone else."

She rolled her eyes. “You are nuts. And with so many little ones, the only thing you will be christening is yourself when your sons get into trouble.”

I grinned. “They won’t get caught.”

She narrowed her eyes on me. “But that’s not the point,” she grumbled, rubbing her belly.

I pressed my palm on her stomach and instantly she sighed. “God, Luca. If I could keep your hand right there until the day I give birth, I totally would. I swear, she only stops moving when you touch me.”

I bent my head and nipped her bottom lip. “I can more than just touch you and then our little piccola bambina can sleep for the next hour while you catch up with everyone.”

She choked out a laugh. I was fucking serious. My wife was beautiful, but when pregnant, she was ravishing. It made me want to fuck her six ways to Sunday.

She must have seen something on my face because her laugh died on her lips and her eyes widened.

“You cannot be serious,” she breathed, but her cheeks betrayed her. She was getting aroused too.

She tilted her head, her mouth parted and her cheeks flushed. I noted her squeezing her thighs and I smiled knowingly.

“I’m dead serious,” I said. “I want your pussy on my dick.”

She moaned softly, then nodded her head.

We rushed through the school, searching for the empty floor. We found it and I immediately locked the door behind us.

“At least you can’t get me pregnant,” she said, panting pushing me onto the dorm bed.

She sighed in my mouth when I pulled her by the nape and kissed her.

“I love you, baby,” I murmured against her lips.

“I love you too,” she breathed. “You make me so happy.”

That was all that mattered right now. My wife. Our children. Our family.

This was our happily ever after.

THE END

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XOXO

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